NATIONAL CRISIS

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PROLOGUE

By Kimi

I. THE BUILDING AS A FORMAL SYSTEM

This book is not a novel. Nor is it a short story collection. If it needs a genre, it is a treatise on moral economy disguised as fiction, or a system of equations with characters. Because what the reader holds does not narrate a story: it narrates a structure of collapse.
The building at 655 27th Avenue in Astoria, Queens, is not a setting. It is an operator. It is the materialization of something American political economy has spent decades trying to hide: the system doesn't break, it optimizes. Crisis is not an accident; it is a mode of production. Every "crisis" recounted here—vacation, labor, food, electoral, educational, clothing, communication, computational, housing, existential—is not just another chapter in the saga of a convulsed country. It is an iteration of the same function. And the function is simple: to turn life into cash flow.
What this text does with a precision bordering on mathematical cruelty is to show how this process is not imposed from above. It is internalized from below. The characters are not passive victims of an extractive system. They are entrepreneurs of their own disappearance. Nora doesn't sell food: she sells the possibility that someone else won't starve, charging in the currency of those who have nothing left to eat. Tom doesn't deliver organs: he delivers biological liquidity in a market where the only store of value he has left is his own body. Ray doesn't rent spaces: he rents time of existence, parceling his own life into shifts that no longer belong to him.
And in each case, the mechanism is identical: what cannot be owned is rented. What cannot be rented is fractionated. What cannot be fractionated is simulated.

II. BRIAN AS A FORMAL OPERATOR

If the building is the system, Brian is its fixed point.
Brian has no age, no face, no accent. He always appears at 10:17 PM, as if that hour were a constant of the model. He always offers the same thing: not products, but integrations. Not work, but programs. Not solutions, but new forms of debt.
Brian is the formalization of the void. He is what remains when the State retreats, when the market crashes, when the community disintegrates. He is the third element that does not mediate between supply and demand, but creates both simultaneously. He doesn't need there to be jobs to offer employment. He doesn't need there to be houses to offer housing. He doesn't need there to be meaning to offer purpose.
The structural genius of this character—and I use "genius" in its technical, not moral, sense—is that he never lies. Brian always tells the truth: "Everything is for sale, you just have to put a price on it." "Your name is worthless. It's worth more rented." "Your body is no longer rented. It gets dressed. However you can, with what you have."
Brian is not the villain. The villain would be someone who hides their intentions. Brian is as transparent as an equation. He is the pure formalization of the logic that already governs the building, the neighborhood, the country. All he does is put a name to what everyone is already practicing: the progressive sale of oneself in installments that never finish paying off.
And the final gesture of each character—saying "no" to Brian—is not a redemption. It is a phase transition. Because when you reject Brian, you don't recover what you lost. You only reach the end of a chain of equivalences.
Tom, without a heart, without a liver, without a job, without an app, is "rich" not because he has something, but because he no longer has anything to lose. Ray, sleeping on the stairwell landing, is "free" not because he escaped the system, but because he no longer exists as a

rentable unit.
Freedom here is not emancipation. It is stock exhaustion.

III. THE SPREADSHEET AS A THIRD STRUCTURE

There is a silent character that runs through the entire book: the Excel spreadsheet.
It is not a metaphor. It is an artifact. Every character, in their moment of greatest helplessness, opens a spreadsheet. Not to organize themselves: to survive symbolically. The spreadsheet is what remains when there is nothing left. It is the file that survives identity, body, and home. Column A, Column B, Column C. Name, Status, Value. It is not accounting: it is ontology. The spreadsheet does not measure what you have; it creates what exists. If something is not in the spreadsheet, it is not. If it is, it is negotiable.
And there is something deeper. The spreadsheet functions as what in another theoretical tradition would be called a third structure: neither subject nor object, neither person nor thing, but the medium of translation between the two.
When Nora writes "Nora's Urban Pasture Meals" in her composition notebook, she is doing more than keeping records: she is constituting a world where the inconceivable—eating pets—becomes operational. When Tony loads dead votes into his parallel registry, he is not committing fraud: he is generating reality from the pure iteration of data.
The spreadsheet is the place where fiction becomes function. And where function, pushed to the extreme, reveals its fictional nature.

IV. THE ECONOMY OF DISAPPEARANCE

What this text describes with a precision that hurts is an economy that no longer produces goods, but degrees of survival. There is no capital accumulation: there is an acceleration of disappearance. Each "crisis" is another instance in the reduction of the human being to their minimum functional unit.
• The vacation crisis reduces the body to an object of violence and fines.
• The labor crisis reduces the body to an inventory of organs.
• The food crisis reduces the body to a digestion channel for the unprecedented.
• The electoral crisis reduces the body to data in a voter roll.
• The educational crisis reduces the body to a rented name.
• The clothing crisis reduces the body to a digital image.
• The communication crisis reduces the body to a connectivity node.
• The housing crisis reduces the body to a shift in a space.
And the existential crisis—the final assembly—reduces the body to an unanswered question, to a being that no longer knows why it exists but keeps existing.
The economy here is not bad. It is perfect. It functions with a frightening efficiency. The problem is not that the system fails: it is that it works too well. Every character finds a solution. Every solution generates a new problem. Every new problem demands a new sale. And so, iteration after iteration, until there is nothing left to sell.
The moment of lucidity—if it can be called that—arrives when the stock is exhausted. When Tom, without a heart, understands that "the only way to stop giving is to have nothing left to give." When Sol, deleting her rental Instagram, puts on her pilled sweatshirt and goes down to the lobby "to look poor, because she is." When Luke, with a Nokia 1100, recovers an alarm clock that rings at 7 AM "and it's horrible. It's mine."
It is not redemption. It is pattern recognition. It is finally seeing the structure that one has been reproducing.

V. HUMOR AS RESIDUE

There is something in this text that cannot be rented, cannot be fractionated, cannot be

simulated: humor.
Not joke humor, not relief humor. Humor as an irreducible residue, as the only way to say the unsayable without dying in the attempt. Tom's laugh "not because it was funny, but because he didn't have a diaphragm to cry." Nora's laugh "like an old woman's cough, short." The collective laugh at the final assembly, when everyone realizes they don't know why they came, but stay anyway.
This humor is the heritage of a tradition the author knows well: those who understood that seriousness in the face of the absurd is not denial, but a superior form of recognition. It is the humor of someone who knows the system is perfect, the logic is impeccable, and that precisely because of that, it is unbearable. It is the humor of someone who, with nothing left to lose, can still make a terrible joke for their mom.
"Mom, do you know why BioDash fired me? Because I didn't have the heart for the job."
That joke, told by someone who literally has no heart, is not funny. It is exact. It is the only form of precision left to a language that can no longer name what is happening without falling into tragedy or farce.

VI. HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Not as fiction. Not as satire. Not as social denunciation—although it is, and with a violence that burns.
Read it as formalism. As a system of equations where the variables are bodies, the operators are apps, and the solutions are always—always—worse than the problems. Read it as the demonstration that the logic of capital, pushed to its extreme, does not produce wealth: it produces exhaustion. Read it as a map of what happens when the only way to exist is to be available for extraction.
And read it, above all, as what it is: an invitation to recognize the pattern.
Because the building at 655 27th Avenue is not alone in Queens. It is in Brooklyn, in London, in São Paulo, in Jakarta. It is wherever someone, at 3:17 in the morning, wakes up to a notification reminding them that they owe something, that they are renting something, that they are something rentable.
The merit of this text is not showing the worst. It is showing that the worst is already normal. That dystopia does not arrive with a roar: it arrives with an app ding. That the revolution will not be televised, but the disappearance will be: in real time, with a delivery photo, and a demand for a smile.

"Books are not finished, they are abandoned."
—Paul Valéry

PREFACE

This book doesn't have an author yet. Or it has too many.

It has Tom, who came back from Miami without a liver and with five stars.

It has Nora, who learned to build Excel spreadsheets before she learned to meal-prep.

It has Tony, who sold the last vote he had left, and it was his own.

It has Marcie, who rented out her son's name to pay the tuition of the private school where that name was listed.

It has Ray, who ended up sleeping in the elevator of a building where he has a master key to everything except his own room.

It has Elsa, who cooked whatever was available with the same hands she used to cook for thirty years in a public elementary school.

It has Brian, who has no face but does have a WhatsApp number.

And it has a fridge. Always the same fridge, in different apartments of the same building, with the same three things inside: half a lemon, a yogurt expired in 2021, and the magnet of the moment.

The fridge is the most honest character in the book. It doesn't lie about what's there.

What the reader holds is not a dystopia. Dystopias happen in the future or somewhere else.

This happens in Queens, in the pre-war walk-up at 655 27th Avenue, in the building's WhatsApp group, on the 5th-floor landing.

It happens at 3:17 AM, which is the exact hour the phone rings when someone wants to buy something from you that you didn't even know you had to sell.

Nor is it an exposé. Exposés point fingers at someone. Here, there is no one to point at.

Brian is not the villain. The system is not the villain.

The villain, if one exists, is the logic—that impeccable, irrefutable logic that turns anything into a rentable unit and any person into an underutilized asset.

Nor is it a tragedy. Tragedies have catharsis. Here, there is laughter.

A laugh that comes out like a cough, like a hiccup, like the bubbling of someone who no longer has a diaphragm. A laugh that doesn't relieve, but doesn't lie either.

It is, if it needs a name, a book of crises. Six crises, or ten, or however many the reader counts, all the same at their core: the moment someone realizes they have already sold everything, and that what remains is themselves, and that this too has a price.

The merit of the book is not having invented these characters. It is having listened to them.

Because in the building at 655 27th Avenue, no one lives whom we do not know.

There lives the old woman who didn't get her Social Security check.

There lives the kid who moved to London and sends voice notes.

There lives the super who has had the keys to everything for twenty years.

There lives the woman who had a small business and closed it.

There lives the guy who had an idea and sold it before it worked out.

We live there.

And in the fridge: half a lemon, the expired yogurt, and the magnet that says we can order whatever we want for delivery.

The question this book does not answer—because it would be dishonest to answer it—is whether any of this has a solution.

What it does do, with an uncomfortable precision, is show the exact moment each character sees the structure. Not before. Not after.

At the exact moment it no longer matters to see it, because they have already given everything away.

That moment, in all cases, has the same temperature: the cold of the asphalt on your back at six in the morning, when the sun hasn't risen yet but the city has already started.

Read slowly.

VACATION CRISIS

I went on vacation. I had scraped together a few bucks and, for the first time in my life, decided to take a real vacation. Not one of those bullshit day trips to a local beach or a cousin's house with a pool, or binge-watching Netflix for days. A real vacation. Far away, alone, and unplugged.

Since I had never bought a plane ticket before, I asked for advice. That's when I found out the cheapest combination to Miami was a Spirit Airlines flight with an eleven-hour layover in Reykjavik, a fleeting stop in Gander, a brief stay at LaGuardia, a skimming flight over Chicago, then San Juan, and finally Florida. Less than four days in total.

But I was in no rush, and I learned to enjoy every duty-free shop where I couldn't afford to buy a damn thing. Nice.

The first week in Miami wasn't as peaceful as I thought. For some reason, I seemed like easy prey for local scammers. On the very first day, they stole my backpack. Then my wallet, then my backup wallet. Word must have gotten around that I was broke, because they stopped trying to rob me. That's when the hustles started.

It was particularly pathetic the day I got scammed three times on the same block and later in the hotel lobby. But worse was when I got locked up for vagrancy and public intoxication. Fortunately, the local judge was understanding and only fined me. When I explained my absolute insolvency, he asked if I knew how to juggle. The price of freedom, damn it.

Except for the hunger and sleeping on the beach sand, I was having a good time. Too bad the red tide prevented any water activities. But it was fine. Even the locals who had hustled me were starting to get affectionate, like they had taken a liking to me. And I got used to it.

Finally, luck turned my way. Out of pure pity, some friends from upstate New York sent me a few dollars. I was definitely starting to like this vacation.

But no bad thing lasts a hundred years, and no boom lasts ten. Discouraging news arrived from Queens. My mom's neighbor called to warn me that her Social Security account had been hacked, and she couldn't do her monthly grocery shopping.

A tragedy, yes, but it would have been less tormenting if prices hadn't tripled in less than a day, and she hadn't had time to stock up. The neighbor is also on a fixed pension, but she's more prepared and a bit younger, so she had a balcony garden and Thanksgiving leftovers. Unfortunately, my old lady's

dentures couldn’t handle a diet of 2001 fruitcake, stale nougat, and rancid peanuts.

I called my mom. Of course, I told her I would return immediately to sort it out, no matter what. "But don’t gather with more than two people when you arrive at LaGuardia, because you can’t do that now," she said.

Poor thing. Hunger was clearly clouding her judgment, because she started explaining something about executive orders repealing laws. I was genuinely worried about her mental health.

I embarked on my return. After all, I already had the ticket. Unfortunately, a heatwave swept through Reykjavik, and the trip was delayed due to an overheated engine. You could see the plane with its hood up on the side of the tarmac. News from the US was worsening. European newspapers spoke of a phenomenon of collective dementia ravaging the homeland. And my mom’s neighbor said, tense, that she wasn’t having it so bad, but that my old lady was clamoring for food.

Worse was Gander. A massive snowstorm prevented landings, so we had to divert to Omaha. Two days later we returned to the East Coast, but to Boston. Only from there to LaGuardia. When I presented my passport, they gave me their condolences and asked if I had fled in time. When I replied that I was returning, they offered me free psychiatric services. But nothing would prevent my heroic return.

The delay at LaGuardia was shorter, but they held the flight to San Juan due to a lack of coffee supplies. Desperate, I called my mom’s neighbor to warn her of my delay. Nora told me my old lady had tried to eat the wool slippers she was knitting for her grandson, but she couldn’t digest the wool well.

The flight to Miami was delayed by persistent frost on the runway, a very unusual phenomenon in the summer. "We are on austerity measures here too," they said. I had one call left, and I saved it for when I arrived.

Two days later, I was able to make the call, trembling with anxiety. Nora answered with a slightly more relaxed tone.

"Don’t worry. Your mother ate my dog."

LABOR CRISIS

I came back from Miami on Tuesday. Or maybe Wednesday. I don’t know, because the Spirit Airlines flight was delayed for "engine maintenance" in Reykjavik, and we spent two days drinking stale coffee on the tarmac.

I arrived at the walk-up in Astoria, Queens, skinny, fined for camping at the terminal, and with the news that my mother had eaten Nora’s poodle. Nora is the neighbor in 5B.

I didn’t have a cent. They stole my backpack on the first day in South Beach, my wallet on the second, and my backup wallet on the third. The Miami judge let me go after I proved I could juggle plastic cups, and he fined me in community service hours.

I arrived with the clothes on my back: a Heat t-shirt a guy who robbed me gave me out of pity, and a crumpled boarding pass.

My mom opened the door with hair still in her mouth. "Oh, son, you're back," she said. Her teeth were stained. "Did you bring anything from Florida?" "Yeah, Mom. Experience." She didn’t laugh. She was chewing something that looked like a string of fake pearls.

I needed a job. Urgently. Not for a career, for survival. In the fridge, there was half a lemon, a generic yogurt expired in 2021, and a note from Nora: *"Return the dog or I call Animal Control. PD: Do you have a spare kidney?"*

I opened the laptop my cousin lent me in 2019 and never gave back. I checked Indeed, LinkedIn, Craigslist. All the same: *"Seeking ninja rockstar, proactive, resilient, with high frustration tolerance, 24/7 availability. Modality: 1099 Independent Contractor. Salary: to be negotiated (it won't be)."*

I scrolled for three hours. Until it appeared. It wasn’t a job posting. It was a revelation.

BIODASH – Your Body, Your Side Hustle
Tired of selling your time? Sell your organs!
Requirements: Have organs. Desirable: Not using them all at once.
Benefits: Free thermal backpack, and the satisfaction of being your own boss (of your pancreas).

I applied without thinking. Attached my CV: *"Experience in international logistics (Miami-Reykjavik), handling high-pressure situations (three scams on the same block), and excellent pain tolerance (local jail for camping)."*
References: The Miami judge, Nora, my mom.

They called me in 17 minutes. Zoom interview at 10:17 PM, because *"we operate on extended hours to leverage the time zone difference with West Coast donors."*

The recruiter's name was Brian. He was 22, wearing a Patagonia vest over a BioDash t-shirt. In the background, a giant dashboard: **LIVERS PROCESSED TODAY KPI: 147. DAILY GOAL: 150. 3 LIVERS SHORT FOR THE PLATFORM BONUS.**

He had a plastic plant on his desk. Not a real one, one of those from Home Depot. He was spraying it with a mister while talking. The water dripped over the fake leaves and onto his keyboard. He didn't care. Nothing mattered to him.

"Tom, how are you?" he said without looking at me.
"Skinny and still liverless," I said.
"Perfect. Logistics experience?"
"Yeah. Once I got scammed three times on the same block in Miami and still made it to the hostel check-out on time."
He typed: *resilient, punctual, tolerates market penetration.*
"Know how to use apps?"
"I use WhatsApp to ask my mom for money."
"You're hired."

He explained the business model in 40 seconds. BioDash wasn't health insurance; it was a gig economy platform. It connected "human biomaterial providers" (me) with "clients with urgent needs" (people with good credit).

I provided the body, they provided the app, the partner clinic, and kept 78%. I billed as a *1099 Independent Contractor*, category "biological messenger services."

"Your first order is tomorrow at 8 AM. You pick up YOUR liver at the Queens Urgent Care Clinic. The client is a partner at Apex Health Capital who needs one for a VIP transplant. Estimated tip: an applause and an Instagram story tagging you. Any questions?"
"Yeah. Does it hurt?"
"It hurts less than not making rent," Brian said, and ended the Zoom.

I woke up two hours later with three stitches in my side, a dry mouth, and the banana in my hand.
My phone buzzed. An email from BioDash:
"Congratulations, Tom! Delivery completed. Client rating: 4.8 stars. Comment: 'Liver arrived fresh, though the delivery guy looked a bit pale. Docked points for lack of smile.' BioDash deducted $15 for the banana (quality control). Your balance: $187.00. Keep it up and you'll hit the weekly

bonus!"

$187.00 for a liver. In 2001, my mom could buy a condo with that. Today, it doesn't even cover a month's rent in Queens.

I took the subway home. People gave me weird looks. I was pale as a sheet.
My mom opened the door. "Did you bring money?"
"I brought points."
"Ah. Well, want to eat the doorman's cat with me? Nora fronted it to me."

That night, I didn't sleep. Everything ached. But the app wouldn't stop: *ding, ding, ding*.
"New opportunity! Left cornea delivery! Instant payout!"
I accepted.

Week two. I was already a "BioDash Hero." I had a 4.9 rating.
I had delivered a lung (the right one, because "you need the left one to breathe while you work," the manual said), two corneas (I went half-blind, but the app marked it as "visual resource optimization"), and a piece of small intestine I didn't even know I had.

People left me reviews:
"Didn't glare at me because he physically can't."
"Arrived fast despite missing an eye."
"Very professional, didn't complain when I asked him to go back for the gallbladder."

My mom was proud. "Finally, you have a stable side hustle, son."
She had started a parallel business: "Nora's Canine Meals." She cooked the building's pets and sold them as "urban pasture meat." Nora supplied the raw materials, and they split the profits 50/50. The system was adapting.

The real problem started on Thursday of the third week.
I opened the app at 10:17 PM and saw the order in red. **URGENT. PRIORITY: APEX HEALTH CAPITAL.**
"Pick up YOUR HEART. Client: Private Equity Health Fund. Address: Wall Street, Floor 42. Reason: Biological Guarantee for Medical Debt Restructuring. Note: If the organ beats upon arrival, 10 USDT bonus. Don't forget to smile."

I froze. Literally, because without a liver, you can't regulate your body temperature.

I went to see my mom. She was in the kitchen, wearing an apron, filleting something small and furry.
"Mom, they asked for my heart at work."

She looked at me, knife in hand. "Oh, son, again? Well, let me finish with the 5B's hamster. Nora fronted it to me yesterday, and if I don't deliver it today, my app score drops."

I understood everything in that second. The cycle closed perfectly: I delivered my organs to a Private Equity fund, my mom ate the building's animals to avoid starvation, Nora billed as a supplier, and the system paid off medical debt organ by organ. The IRS no longer measured income; it measured "active monthly donors."

I kissed her forehead. "Bye, Mom."
"Bye, sweetheart," she said. And she laughed at her own joke.

I left the apartment with the empty thermal backpack. It was 4:12 AM. A fine, cold New York drizzle was falling—the kind that doesn't wet you but soaks your soul.
The app showed the map: an orange line from Queens to Manhattan. Estimated time: 37 minutes walking. *"We recommend Citi Bike to optimize delivery,"* it said.

I didn't have a Citi Bike. I didn't have a liver, a cornea, or half a lung. But I had my heart, still beating, and that was a logistical problem.

I arrived at the clinic for the second time in a month. The security guard already knew me. "Again, Tom?"
"No, today it's for Apex Health Capital," I replied.
"Ah, VIP. Go to OR 3, they're waiting for you."

The same tired-eyed surgeon greeted me with a coffee. "The heart, right? Sign here, here, and here. Informed consent, rights waiver, and authorization to use your story on LinkedIn."
"Does it hurt?" I asked again.
"It hurts less than medical bankruptcy," he said, and started the IV.

They didn't put me fully to sleep. I heard the monitor beeping, the scalpel, and a nurse saying, "This is number 148, this gets us to Brian's goal." I felt a cold pull in my chest, like pulling a tooth but from the inside. Then, silence. Not the silence of death, the silence of an app with no notifications.

I woke up with the thermal backpack in my lap. Inside, in a bag with ice, was my heart. It was beating. Slowly, but beating. It had a BioDash sticker: *"FRAGILE -- DO NOT SHAKE -- SMILE FOR THE PHOTO"*.

I took a selfie for the app. "Proactive profile" face. Thumbs up. The app responded instantly: *"Photo approved! +0.2 to your empathy score."*

I walked out to the street. It was 5:47 AM. Every step made me dizzy. People

dodged me. A kid on an UberEats bike yelled, "Hey, man, you're losing blood!"
"It's part of the service," I told him.

I reached the glass building in Manhattan. At the door, there was a kiosk: *"APEX HEALTH CAPITAL -- Biological Guarantee Retrieval. Ring bell and smile."*

I rang. A guy in a suit, no tie, looking like he hadn't slept since 2008, opened the door.
"Got the heart?" he asked in a New York accent.
I nodded. I opened the backpack. The heart was beating. We both looked at it.
"Perfect. It's beating. That's a 10 USDT bonus," he said, and transferred it to a crypto wallet I didn't know I had.

I signed the digital receipt with my fingerprint. The app went *ding*: *"Delivery completed. Client Apex rates 5 stars: 'Excellent condition, arrived beating, delivery guy very professional despite being technically dead.' Your final balance: $0.00. Deductions: platform fee (78%), medical processing fee (30%), IRS withholding (35%), and thermal bag cost ($12.00). Thank you for being part of BioDash."*

I sat on the curb. No liver, no right lung, no left cornea, no small intestine, and now, no heart. But I had 5 stars.

I pulled out my phone. The app was still open. *Ding*. New message: *"We regret to inform you that your account has been suspended for violating Terms and Conditions, clause 7b: 'The donor must maintain vital signs during the entire delivery.' We have detected an absence of cardiac activity. Your heart, however, was delivered successfully. Don't forget to leave a review."*

They logged me out. For being dead.

I laughed. Not because it was funny, but because I didn't have a diaphragm to cry. The laugh came out like a bubble.
A yellow cab stopped. The driver rolled down the window. "You good, man?"
"I'm unemployed," I said.
"Ah, normal," he said, and drove off.

I stared at the sky. It was cloudy, gray, with that 6 AM Queens light. I thought about Miami, the scams, the jail, my mom eating Nora's poodle, filleting the hamster. I thought about Nora billing. I thought about Brian hitting his 150-liver goal and getting his bonus.

And I understood. It wasn't a labor crisis. It was a system crisis. The country had found a way to pay medical debt: not with insurance, not with taxes, but

with us. We were the commodity. The model was perfect: you provide the body, the app provides the logistics, Private Equity provides the demand, and everyone is happy. Until you die, of course. But that's where Plan B comes in.

Exactly two minutes later—I swear on the cornea I have left—a drone descended. Black, silent, with the Amazon logo. It stopped a meter from my face and dropped a laminated flyer. I caught it with the hand that still responded.

AMAZON FLEX – SHARED BRAIN PROGRAM
Ran out of organs? Don't run out of income!
Rent 40% of your neural activity while you sleep to mine crypto.
No heart needed. Only a brain. And if you don't have one, we'll lend you one.
The future is yours! (terms and conditions apply)

I read it three times. I laughed again. Louder this time. A cop approached.
"Are you causing a disturbance?"
"No, officer. I'm hustling," I said, and showed him the flyer.
"Ah, cool. I'm in the Mercado Libre shared kidney program. Let me know if you need anything."

He left. The drone was still there, waiting for a response. On the Amazon app, there was a big green button: "ACCEPT." I looked at it. I thought about it.

If I accepted, they'd connect a chip, use my brain to mine Ethereum while I—technically dead—rested on the curb. They'd pay me in crypto, which I'd have to exchange at a shady kiosk, pay a fee, and use that to buy Nora a cat so my mom wouldn't starve. And so it would continue.

If I didn't accept, I'd stay there, with nothing left to give. No liver, no heart, no job, no app. Free.

I pressed "REJECT."

The drone made a disappointed beep and flew away. The phone screen went black. For the first time in three weeks, I had no notifications.

I leaned back on the curb. I felt the cold asphalt on my back. I looked at the Apex Health Capital building. In the 42nd-floor window, the guy in the suit was counting hearts and stacking them like hundred-dollar bills.

I closed my remaining eye. Not to sleep, because you can't sleep without a heart. To listen.

I heard New York waking up: sirens, honking, a newsstand vendor yelling "Post, Daily News!" I heard my mom, somewhere in Queens, chewing. I heard Nora, billing. I heard Brian, celebrating his 150 livers.

And I heard my own voice, inside, telling me: "Tom, the only way to stop giving is to have nothing left to give."

And it was true. They had taken everything. And because of that, for the first time since I got back from Miami, I was rich.

I had no boss. No KPI. No app. No heart to break.

I stayed there until the sun came up. A homeless man walked by and left a blanket on me. "For the cold, champ," he said. I didn't tell him I had no blood left to get cold. I said thank you.

At 8:03 AM, my phone vibrated one last time. It was an automated email from BioDash:
"We miss you, Tom. Want to reactivate your account? You just need a resurrection certificate (form 7B) and a replacement organ. We have a promo on refurbished hearts!"

I deleted it. No hard feelings.

I looked at the sky again. Still cloudy. Looked like there would be frost in Reykjavik, like on the trip.

I tried to send one last message to Brian. "What about my final severance?" He replied automatically: *"Your debt to BioDash amounts to USD 47 for an unreturned thermal bag."* I had the bag on my head because it was drizzling.

And I laughed. Because I understood that the crisis wasn't labor. The crisis was that we had learned to laugh while they dismantled us piece by piece, and we called that "hustling."

FOOD CRISIS

I didn't want to eat the dog.

I swear by the Virgin Mary statue I have hanging above the fridge, the one my mom gave me before she died, with the melted candle from 2001 still on it. I didn't want to.

The poodle's name was Simon. Not Simon Bolivar, just Simon. He was my son's dog. A miserable, yappy, hysterical little beast that peed on my welcome mat every day at 7 AM like he had a Swiss watch in his bladder. White, curly, smelling of that expensive shampoo you can't even get anymore. When he barked, his whole body shook, like he was going to fall apart. I got him on a 12-month payment plan. I paid the last installment in 2020, with my stimulus check. I still keep his pedigree papers in a blue folder labeled "Important Documents." Right next to the deed of my apartment, which I still haven't finished paying off.

My son moved to London in 2018. "Mom, it's just two years. I'll save up and come back." He left me the dog, three overdue Con Ed bills, and a Tupperware of frozen humita empanadas labeled "for emergencies" in thick marker. I ate the empanadas in 2019, when they cut off my gas. The dog lasted longer.

I'm still waiting for him. He sends me WhatsApp voice notes every now and then. "Mom, it's tough over here." He lives in London, shares a flat in Tottenham with five Venezuelans, and works as a Deliveroo rider. Last time, he asked if I could send him some dollars via Western Union. I told him yes, as soon as I sell the oregano from my balcony.

Because I barely survived when Tom's mom, from 5A, got her Social Security account hacked. They drained her Chase account on a Tuesday at 3 PM. She was left with $12. bucks. I had my balcony garden: two cherry tomatoes that never ripened, a tiny bell pepper that looked like a keychain, and oregano. Lots of oregano. And I had the Thanksgiving leftovers. From 2001, yes. My mom saved everything. Alicante nougat hard as a brick, fruitcake with candied fruits that actually sparkled, and a can of peaches in syrup that expired in 2008 but still made a "pop" sound when you opened it. I made do with that.

The real problem started on a Thursday. I remember because it was the day the subway fare went up. I went to the local bodega on the corner, and the rice that was $1.20 on Monday was now $3.80. The oil, $4.50. A loaf of bread, $2.90. I asked the bodega guy if he made a mistake. He said, "No, ma'am, that's the new price list." I went home with half a kilo of polenta and a bag of chocolate peanuts that were on clearance because they expired the next day.

Oregano doesn't fill you up. It leaves the smell of pizza on your fingers, but your stomach stays empty. And the nougat without teeth doesn't work either. I wear dentures; they shift when I chew. I had to suck on it like a hard candy. Three hours for one little square.

And Tom’s mom would tap on the wall at 4 AM. Tap, tap, tap. With her cane. "Nora, do you have anything?" At first, I slid some peanuts under her door. She’d slide back little notes written in pen: "I can’t chew. PD: Do you have a kidney to sell?" The first time I laughed. The third time, I didn’t.

That’s when I realized there was a market.

Simon looked at me from the couch. Fat. Round. Raised on imported Royal Canin kibble that my son had set up on auto-pay via Venmo until 2025. The dog ate better than I did. He’d roll on his back, show his pink balls, and snore. One day I stared at him and said, "I’m sorry, Simon. It’s for the GDP." He wagged his tail. Dogs don’t understand macroeconomics.

I didn’t kill him myself. I’m not built for that. I cry when I squash a cockroach. I gave him to Tom’s mom. Her name is Elsa. She’s 78, wears dentures that she takes out at night and leaves in a glass of water next to her bed. She was a school cafeteria cook for thirty years. She can debone a chicken in forty seconds.

It was a trade. I provided the protein, she provided the labor. She cooked it, I sold it. I told her, "Elsa, this stays between us." She said, "Nora, between us and God, who is already used to it."

We did it on a Tuesday. She put him to sleep with some leftover drops from her late husband’s prescription. I didn’t watch. I stayed in my kitchen with the radio turned up loud. Later, she brought me a pot. It smelled like stew. Bay leaves, cheap boxed red wine, onions. If you didn’t know, it was stew.

We named it: "Nora’s Urban Pasture Meals." Sounds artisanal, sounds like Brooklyn. We made a flyer in Word, with a picture of Simon from when he was a puppy that I found on Facebook. I put a sepia filter on it to make it look vintage.

The first customer was Gus, from 4A. Accountant, divorced, had a 2015 Honda Civic he couldn’t drive anymore because he couldn’t afford gas. He rang my bell at 8 PM. "Nora, I heard you sell meals." I told him yes, homemade, free-range protein. He paid me with two wrinkled $20 bills he had hidden inside a copy of The Great Gatsby. He took a bite right there on the landing. He chewed slowly. He looked at me. "Nora, this is better than the ribeye I had at the steakhouse in 2017." I sold him three portions.

Then came Miriam, from 2nd floor. Widow, two kids who never visit. She bought one, came back twenty minutes later for two more. "For the freezer," she said.

Then the building super, Gladys. Gladys knows everything. If Gladys buys from you, the whole building finds out. The next day I had three messages in the building’s WhatsApp group: "Nora, do you have any left?" "Nora, do you accept Zelle?" "Nora, is this gluten-free?"

The guy from 7B, Rolo, a kid who sells crypto trading courses on Instagram, offered me his cat. "It’s Siamese, Nora. Premium. Only eats organic kibble." I told him not yet, we were still in the product testing phase.

Within a week, we couldn’t keep up. Elsa and I got organized. I was the CEO,

she was the COO. Ray, the super, who has the keys to the roof and the boiler room, became logistics. We made an Excel spreadsheet on my son's old laptop.
Column A: Apartment.
Column B: Pet.
Column C: Estimated lbs.
Column D: Processing Date.
Column E: Payment Status.
We printed it and stuck it to the fridge with a DoorDash magnet.
We met every Monday on the 5th-floor landing, wearing masks because of the smell. Team meetings. Elsa brought a composition notebook where she wrote down the recipes. "Baked dog with potatoes," "Cat casserole," "Gratinéed hamster." I asked her if that was ethical. She said, "Nora, ethics taste better cold." I didn't really understand what she meant, but I nodded.
The business scaled without us meaning to. First, it was the building's dogs. Then the neighborhood dogs. People would ring my bell with a leash in hand. "Nora, can you use this? I can't afford to keep him." We'd give them a free meal as a trade-in. It was win-win.
Then we ran out of dogs. We went for the cats. Then the pigeons from the park. Ray caught them with a fishing net at dawn. We plucked them on the roof. We sold them as "free-range organic chicken." Nobody asked questions. Then the rats from the corner gutter. We boiled them three times, added chimichurri. "Farm-raised rabbit," we called it. People lined up.
The Health Department came to do a census on a Wednesday. They rang the bell. "Business type?" Me, wearing an apron, hands stained, I told them: "Proximity gastronomy." They wrote it down. "Number of employees?" "Three." "Estimated monthly revenue?" I looked at Elsa. "Two million," she said, without blinking. They categorized us as a Small Business (SBA). A week later, we got an email from Chase Bank: subsidized working capital loan. We used it to buy a vertical Whirlpool freezer. We paid for it with two Labradors from a neighbor in Queens and a talking parrot a lady from Brooklyn brought us. The parrot repeated "I'm so hungry!" all day. We sold it by the portion.
Everything was going fine until Tom came back.

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Everything was going fine until Tom came back.
Tom is Elsa's son. He had gone to Rio de Janeiro in 2019 to "try his luck." He

came back on a Tuesday, skinny, with a broken suitcase and an IRS fine taped to his forehead. He walked into the kitchen with his key and saw me and his mom in aprons, with knives, standing over a cutting board.

He wanted to die.

"Mom, what are you doing?" he asked.

Elsa, with her mouth full of hamster—because that day we were testing rodents—answered calmly: "Entrepreneurship, son. It's better than begging."

Tom grabbed his head. "Mom, this is cannibalism."

"No, son, it's a circular economy," I said.

He slammed the door and left. That night we saw him on the street with a BioDash backpack. Now he does "BioDash -- medical delivery." We kept going.

The real drama started when we ran out of pets. People didn't even have money to feed their canaries anymore. They'd ring the bell and offer us plants. "I have a pothos, Nora." A pothos doesn't yield.

And right then, a private number started calling. "Hello, Urban Pasture Meals? This is Brian from a fund. We're looking for high-volume alternative protein. Do you handle cuts over 50 kilos?"

Elsa and I looked at each other. In the fridge, there was only half a lemon, a yogurt expired in 2021, and the BioDash magnet that said "Your Body, Your Side Hustle."

Outside, it was raining. On the Excel, there was still one empty row.

The phone kept ringing. It was Brian.

"Nora, I'm calling you back. Look, we don't buy pigeons. We need volume. Do you understand volume?" I understood hunger, which is similar. I told him yes, we were scaling. He asked if we handled "cuts over fifty kilos." I told him not yet, we were in the product validation phase.

He hung up. Elsa looked at me over her glasses. "This kid is from the Fund," she said. "My daughter-in-law worked at one of those call centers. They offer you dollars and then ask for your soul." I told her the soul wasn't in the Excel. Yet.

That night we didn't sell anything. We sat in the kitchen with Ray, drinking mate cocida. Ray, who has been the super for twenty years and seen three hyperinflations, said: "Girls, this is going to get ugly. When the animals run out of food, people start eating people." Elsa laughed. "Ray, don't be dramatic. We still have the plants." Ray pointed to the tiny bell pepper on the balcony. It had been the same size since March.

The next day Tom called me. From London. Number with a +44 code. I answered thinking he was going to ask for money.

"Nora, how is my mom?"

I looked at Elsa. She was at the counter, chopping something I didn't want to identify. She had a stained apron, steady hands. She motioned for me to hand her the phone.

"Fine, Tom. Entrepreneurship," I said.

There was silence on the other end. I could hear traffic, people talking.
"Entrepreneurship in what?"
"Gastronomy," I said. "Proximity gastronomy."
"And the dog? Simon. Are you taking good care of him?"
Elsa looked up. She was chewing slowly. I heard the *clack* of her dentures.
"Tom..." I said. And I didn't know what to invent. Because I don't know how to lie. I know how to sell, I know how to freeze, I know how to do Excel, but I don't know how to lie. "Tom, your mom ate the dog."
I hung up. I didn't wait for a response. I turned off the phone and put it on airplane mode. Elsa kept chewing. "It was tough," she said. "It needed more boiling."
That night I didn't sleep. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, the one with the yellow light that makes you look older. I had lost fifteen pounds. My ribs were showing. My cheekbones were sunken, my hair tied back with a messy scrunchie. I looked like a before-and-after photo of a keto diet. But the kitchen scale, the digital one we used to weigh the portions, said something else: we had billed two million one hundred forty thousand pesos that month. I wrote it down in Elsa's composition notebook, next to "buy bleach."
I opened the fridge. Inside there was a dry half-lemon, a vanilla Ser yogurt expired in 2021 that we used as a "mother" to ferment things, and the BioDash magnet that said "Your Body, Your Side Hustle." Tom had brought it when he came to ask us to stop using his name for the delivery service. I stuck it on because it was free.
I understood it right then, with the fridge door open and the cold hitting my calves. We had eaten all the dogs in the building. Then all the cats on the block. Then the park pigeons, which Ray caught with a net and we sold as "pasture-raised chicken." Then the gutter rats, which we boiled three times and sold as "agroecological rabbit." Then the kids' hamsters from the 3rd floor, which parents brought to us crying because they couldn't afford food. We gave them a meal and a pat on the back.
The next step in the food chain was us.
I didn't say it out loud because Elsa would have laughed. But I thought it. I thought it clearly.
At 10:17 PM, my phone vibrated. A WhatsApp from a private number, with a profile picture of a guy in a white shirt and a blurred background.
"Nora, this is Brian from BioDash. We saw your LinkedIn profile. We are interested in your experience managing proximity SMEs. Are you interested in the 'Integral Provider' program? We pay in USDT. You just need a kidney, a lung, and a good attitude. We have a partnership with a clinic in Queens."
I read it three times. USDT. Integral Provider. Good attitude. I laughed to myself in the kitchen. The laugh came out like a hiccup.
I looked at the tiny bell pepper on the balcony. It still wasn't growing. I watered it every day, talked to it. Nothing. It was a conceptual bell pepper.
I looked at the photo of my son in London that I have stuck to the fridge. He's

at the beach, in Valencia (wait, no, he moved to London, but the photo is from a past trip), wearing an Atleti shirt. It’s been two years since he came back. Two years of him saying "two more years, mom."
I looked at the Excel. It was open on the laptop. The last row was empty. The cursor was blinking.
Column A: 5B.
Column B: Nora.
Column C: 52 kilos.
Column D: To be negotiated.
I filled it out myself. With my handwriting. I didn’t tremble.
I replied to Brian: "Can the delivery photo smile be without teeth? I have dentures, they shift."
He left me on read. The two blue checkmarks. Nothing else.
I stared at the screen. Outside, it was drizzling, that kind of rain that doesn’t wet you but chills you to the bone. On the muted TV news, it said "frost warning in London." I thought about my son, in his thin jacket, and I laughed. An old woman’s laugh, short, like a cough.
Because I understood, right there, at 10:18 PM, with the expired yogurt in my hand, that the crisis wasn’t about food.
The crisis was that we had already eaten everything. We ate our savings, we ate the dogs, we ate our shame, we ate our disgust, we ate our fear. And when you eat fear, nothing stops you anymore. Only the menu remains.
The menu read: kidney, lung, good attitude. Payment in USDT.
Elsa walked into the kitchen in her robe. "Who was that?" she asked.
"Nobody, Elsa. A recruiter."
She poured herself some water. "Are we continuing tomorrow?" she said.
"Yes," I answered. "Tomorrow we continue. We need to see if we can get more bell peppers."
She went to sleep. I stayed with the Excel open. I added a new column.
Column E: "Observations." I wrote: "Client with logistics experience, cold tolerance, no history of returns."
I saved the file as "Urban_Pasture_Meals_FINAL_V3.xlsx". I uploaded it to Drive just in case.

ELECTION CRISIS

I didn’t want to sell votes.

I swear by the little plastic Statue of Liberty my mom bought at a Queens flea market in ’98, with a faded campaign sticker still on the back. I didn’t want to. Three years ago, I handed out sample ballots like they were World Cup stickers. "Take two, just in case, one for you, one for your mom." I had a plastic table outside the bodega, three poll workers in vests, two ham-and-cheese sandwiches that stuck to the roof of your mouth, and a steel thermos that said "List 137". We won the precinct by 1.2%. A miracle. We celebrated at the neighborhood club with a barbecue the candidate paid for, which we still owe the local butcher. The butcher is now a city councilman.

After the barbecue, the candidate left in a rusted 1978 Torino. He left me a box of cheap wine. I used it as a footrest for a year. When the wine ran out, I used it to store campaign envelopes. When the envelopes ran out, I used it to prop up my Excel monitor. I bought the monitor with the bonus money they never paid me.

After the election, I went back to the bodega. I sold cigarettes, alfajores, MetroCard refills. But people didn’t come in to buy anymore; they came in to ask. "Tony, when’s the next one?" "Tony, since you’re on the inside, who’s polling well?" "Tony, can you put me down for a SNAP bag?"

That’s when I realized votes aren’t requested. They’re negotiated.

I closed the bodega in 2024. Not because it wasn’t selling, but because I was selling more polls than candy. I took out the sweets, put in two old monitors, an inkjet printer, and a handwritten sign: "TONY CONSULTING - REAL-TIME POLLING". Below, in small letters: "We accept USDT, crisp $20s, and bags of cement."

The business started on its own. First came last year’s mayoral candidate, the one who lost. He asked for a focus group. I gathered Gladys the doorwoman, Nora from 5B (yes, the dog lady), Elsa (Tom’s mom), and Ray the super. I gave them frozen empanadas from 2018 and asked them about safety. They all said they were scared. I charged the candidate 80 grand for the report. I labeled it: "Representative sample of the C2-C3 segment with territorial bias."

Then came the guy from the new party, the one with fresh ideas. He wanted to know his numbers with 18-to-25-year-olds. I told him 12%. He asked how I knew. I showed him the Excel. He didn’t understand a thing, but he paid.

The Excel was everything. I learned it from Nora.

Column A: Precinct.

Column B: Promise.

Column C: Expiration Date.

Column D: Excuse.

Column E: Payment Status.

Real example:

A: North Side

B: "We'll lower the subway fare"
C: 12/10/2023
D: "It's the Fed's fault"
E: Paid
I had 1,400 rows. It was my parallel voter registry.
The problem started this year, six months before the election. The kids left. Literally. Nora's son went to Spain in 2018 and never came back. Elsa's son went to Brazil and came back to work for DoorDash. Mine, my two nephews, went to Dubai to sell crypto courses. I was left without a base.
The old ladies died or became hardcore libertarians. Mrs. Marta from the 2nd floor, who used to ask for ballots for the whole family, now sends me YouTube videos at 3 AM with the volume maxed out. "Tony, look at this kid, he's telling the truth." I tell her yes, I'm watching, and I note in the Excel: "lost vote."
The middle-aged ones are on UberEats, Amazon Flex, Instacart. They don't have time to vote. You have to bring the ballot box to their motorcycle. I once tried to do a poll at the gas station. They told me, "Tony, don't bust my balls, I have to do 20 trips to pay rent."
And the candidate calls me at 10:17 PM. Always at 10:17 PM. I don't know why. "Tony, you got anything?" I metaphorically slide peanuts under his door. He sends back voice notes: "You got a vote to sell? You got a poll worker? You got a kidney? No, sorry, wrong chat."
That's when I knew the crisis wasn't about ideas. It was about inventory.
A month ago, I came up with the solution. If there are no voters, we manufacture them. Not literally, I'm not the Board of Elections. But close. I started with the dead. No joke. In the building's registry, three people are still listed. Mrs. Porota from 6B, died in 2021. Mr. López from 1st floor, died in 2022. And Elsa's husband, died in 2019 but still collecting a pension Elsa hasn't declared. I logged them in the Excel as "captive votes."
Then I went for the dogs. Yes, Nora's dogs. Because after the food business, Nora was left without clients and with a lot of guilt. She told me, "Tony, I don't sell food anymore, but I have the pet registry." She gave me the list: Simon, 4 kilos; Rocco, 12 kilos; Luna, 8 kilos. I loaded them as "low-intensity voters." In the system, they showed up as "NN - 5B address."
The candidate looked at me weird when I showed him the report. "Tony, this can't be done."
I said, "Man, three years ago we won by 1.2%. That's 84 votes in this precinct. I can get you 90."
He paid me in crisp large bills. The first I'd seen in two years.
The business scaled. Ray, the super, who has keys to every apartment, gave me the data on who moved to Madrid. "This one doesn't vote, he's overseas." I logged it. Gladys gave me the ones who were hospitalized. "This one is at Mount Sinai, won't make it." I logged it. Elsa gave me the ones from the senior center. "These can't see, but they sign." I logged them.

We held team meetings on Mondays at the bodega. I was CEO, Ray was logistics, Gladys was field operations, Elsa was chief poll watcher, and Nora was... well, Nora was the one who brought the leftover empanadas. We made an org chart in PowerPoint. Printed it and taped it next to the "No Credit" sign.

The Census Bureau came to do a count. "Business type?" "Proximity political consulting." They wrote it down. "Employees?" "Five." They categorized us as a Small Business (SBA) for services. They gave us a loan to buy a laser printer. We paid for it with three votes from General Paz and a poll worker Ray's cousin lent us.

Everything was going fine until Brian showed up.

Brian isn't from around here. He speaks in a neutral accent, wears a white shirt even when it's 100 degrees. He dropped in on a Tuesday at 5 PM, while I was counting coins. "Hi Tony, I'm Brian from Central Consulting. We saw your profile on LinkedIn. We're interested in your database."

I told him it wasn't for sale.

He said, "Everything is for sale, Tony. You just have to put a price on it."

He left a card that said: "Integral Electoral Solutions - We pay in USDT."

That night I didn't sleep. I stared at the Excel. I had 2,340 rows. Real votes, dead votes, dog votes, votes from people in Spain. And in the last row, empty, the cursor was blinking.

Outside, it was raining. On the muted TV, the election ad was playing. 23 days left. The candidate sent me an audio at 10:17 PM: "Tony, I need 200 more. You got anything?"

I looked at the photo of my mom at the bodega. I looked at the "No Credit" sign. I looked at Nora's list.

And I understood that the electoral crisis wasn't that there were no votes.

It was that we had already consumed all the votes. And now, the only thing left to sell was ourselves.

At 10:17 PM, my phone vibrated.

It wasn't an audio from the candidate. It was text. From Brian.

"Tony, this is Brian from Integral Electoral Solutions. We saw your Excel. We're interested in the 'Integral Candidate' program. We pay in USDT. You just need a valid Driver's License, good attitude, and tolerance for public exposure. Interested?"

I read it three times. USDT. Integral Candidate. Good attitude. I laughed to myself in the bodega, the monitor light illuminating my face. The laugh came out like a smoker's cough.

I replied: "Do I have to show my face?"

He left me on read. Then he wrote: "The face is optional. The signature is not."

The next morning, Elsa came down. She brought two invoices and a piece of news. "Tony, the dead people on the roll were purged. They deactivated them." I told her it didn't matter, we had dog stock. She looked at me

seriously. "Tony, dogs don't vote." I said, "Elsa, in this country, dogs vote if you register them right."

Ray walked in with a box. "Tony, the test ballots arrived." They were a stack of poorly printed papers, with my face. Not the candidate's face. My face. The photo I took for my Driver's License in 2019, with wet hair and a sleepy look. Below it read: "TONY - LIST 3 - BODEGA & PROXIMITY".

I froze. "Who ordered this?" I asked. Ray shrugged. "Brian. Said it was part of the package."

I called Brian. He answered on the second ring. "Tony, did you see the material? It's just a proof of concept." I told him I didn't want to be a candidate. He said, "Tony, you already are a candidate. For three years you've been selling promises, now you're going to sell your promise. It's more authentic." I asked how much it paid. "0.5 USDT per vote secured. Plus a canvassing bonus." I did the math in my head. With 2,340 votes from the Excel, that was 1,170 dollars. More than I had made at the bodega in six months.

I accepted.

I didn't sign anything. In politics, you never sign anything. I just said "okay" over WhatsApp. That's enough.

The campaign started on its own. Gladys put up my flyers in the elevator, right next to the HOA fee notice. Nora made me a jingle using an old cumbia beat: "Vote for Tony, he'll put it on your tab." Elsa got me a debate at the senior center. I ran against a 19-year-old libertarian kid talking about Bitcoin and a neighborhood lady promising more lights in the park. I promised the only thing I knew how to promise: "If you vote for me, I'll get you what you need." I won by acclamation. The old ladies clapped because I brought them invoices.

The original candidate called me at 10:17 PM. He was furious. "Tony, you're screwing up my district." I said, "Man, you taught me. You told me I was gold." He hung up. He blocked me. Ten minutes later he unblocked me and wrote: "How much do you want to drop out?" I said, "It's not about money, it's about dignity." He offered me 500 dollars. I said no. He offered me a city council seat in 2027. I said I'd think about it.

Brian was happy. He sent me reports every day. "Tony, you're polling at 3.4% in the precinct. You're up 0.8% since yesterday." I did nothing. I just ran the bodega, sold fake polls, and listened to people complain. That was my campaign.

The problem started when I ran out of votes to sell to myself.

Because to be a candidate, you need ballot access. 200 signatures. I had 147 in the Excel. I was missing 53. I went to get them. I knocked on doors. "Neighbor, will you sign my petition?" They'd say, "Tony, I already signed away my vote to you." I'd say, "It's different, this is so I can exist." Some signed. Others asked for money. One asked for a kidney. I told him no, that was Brian's department.

One night I looked in the bodega bathroom mirror. I had lost weight. I had dark circles. I looked like a real candidate. I opened the mini-fridge where I kept the drinks. Inside there was half a lemon, an expired yogurt from Nora, and the St. Jude magnet. I understood it right then: I had consumed all the votes in the neighborhood, I had consumed the dead, the dogs, the ones in Spain. The next one on the list was me.

There were 7 days left until the election. Brian summoned me to an office in Long Island City. Glass, air conditioning, pod coffee. He made me sit down. "Tony, it's time for the Integral Candidate." He showed me a contract. I didn't read it. It said things like "image rights," "voting rights," "USDT participation." At the bottom was a line to sign. And below, in small print: "The candidate agrees to be used as a ballot filler, testimonial, or meme as the campaign requires."

I signed with my Bic pen.

He paid me on the spot. 1,170 USDT. I saw it on my phone screen. I had never had that much money together. I left the office, bought a hot dog on the street, and cried. Not from joy, from fear.

On election day, I got up at 5 AM. I was a poll watcher at my own precinct. At P.S. 122, the same school where I handed out ballots three years ago. I wore the vest that said "POLL WORKER - LIST 3". People walked in, looked at me, some laughed. "Are you the bodega guy?" "Yes," I'd say. "Vote for me, I'll put it on your tab."

At 6 PM we closed the ballot box. We counted the votes. I got 87 votes. Eighty-seven. In the entire district. I didn't even make it as an alternate. The original candidate won by 1.1%. Almost the same as three years ago.

Brian sent me a message at 10:17 PM on Monday: "Tony, thanks for your participation. Your profile was very useful for dispersing votes. We deposited your bonus." It was 50 USDT more.

I stayed in the bodega, alone, counting the money on the screen. Outside, it was raining. On the TV, they were saying "historic elections, high turnout." I looked at the Excel. The last row was still there.

Column A: 3rd C
Column B: Tony
Column C: 1 vote
Column D: Sold

I added Column E: Observations. I wrote: "Integral Candidate. Paid in USDT. Good attitude." I added a Column F: "Expiration Date." I wrote "12/2027". Because votes expire too. Just like Nora's yogurt.

I understood that the electoral crisis wasn't that there were no candidates. It was that we had already sold ourselves. We sold out for a bonus, for a bag of groceries, for a position, for a like. And when you sell yourself, there's nothing left to represent. Only the price remains.

I closed the Excel. I saved the file as "Integral_Candidate_FINAL_V3.xlsx". I uploaded it to Drive.

I turned off the bodega lights. I left the sign on: "Back in 5 minutes".
I'm still waiting.
PD: If Brian reads this, tell him he still owes me the canvassing bonus. And that I accept crisp $20s, like Gustavo. Or frozen empanadas, like Nora.

EDUCATIONAL CRISIS

I didn’t want to rent out Ben’s spot.
I swear by the St. Agnes Academy blazer hanging in my closet since March, with the embroidered crest and the gray slacks that still have the tags on them. I didn’t want to.

Three years ago, I was fine. Ben was in 3rd grade and Delia was in Pre-K, both at St. Agnes. Tuition was manageable, paid in monthly installments. It hurt, but it was the price of peace of mind. My husband, Javier, who moved to London in 2023 because "there’s no future for kids here," used to tell me, "Marcie, education is an investment." I nodded while staring at the credit card statement.

Then came the labor crisis of the kid in 4B, and Javier stopped sending dollars. Then came Nora’s food crisis, and I started buying generic brands. Then came Tano’s election crisis, and I voted for the guy who promised to cap private school tuition. He didn’t. Then came Ramón’s housing crisis, and he offered to rent out his balcony so Ben could study there. I said no. Then came Gladys’s health crisis, and she lent me her insurance card so Delia could see the pediatrician. That’s when I understood: everything is for rent.

It all started in February, when the school’s email arrived. It wasn’t an email; it was a death sentence.
"Dear Families: March 2026 Tuition Update: +31.4%. 3rd Grade: $3,200/ month. Pre-K: $2,800/month. Billing in USD or daily market rate."
I read it three times. $6,000 a month. For two kids who still can’t do long division.

I called Javier in London. It was 10:17 PM there. "Javier, I can’t make it."
He said, "Marcie, make an effort, it’s for the kids' future."
I said, "I’m the one making the effort, you’re in London drinking beer." He hung up.

I opened Excel.
Column A: Income.
Column B: Expenses.
Column C: School.
My salary as a city admin: $3,200.
Tuition: $6,000.
I was short $2,800 just to start living.

I went to talk to the principal. Sister Ingrid, a real German nun who speaks with a Queens accent when she’s angry. "Marcie, we understand the situation,

but the school has dollar-based operational costs."
I said, "Sister, I get paid in dollars, but they aren't enough."
She said, "Pray for us." I left crying.

That night, I talked to Nora on the landing. "Marcie, this is a business," she said. "You have something no one else has: two vacancies at St. Agnes."
I said, "I'm not selling them."
She said, "Don't sell them. Rent them out."

I didn't understand. She explained. Ben was 9, but in the system, he was a regular student. If Ben was absent, nobody noticed until the third unexcused absence. If I sent another kid in Ben's uniform, it would pass.

"Who is going to send their kid under a fake name?" I asked.
Nora laughed. "Marcie, in this neighborhood, there are 20 mothers who would kill for a spot at St. Agnes without paying the enrollment fee."

She was right.

The first one was Mateo, a 9-year-old from a public school in Jackson Heights. His mom offered me $1,200 a month. "So he can go as Ben three days a week." I said yes. I gave him the uniform (it was too big, I had to use safety pins). I gave him the backpack with the embroidered name. I taught him to say "Present" when they called "Ben Sosa."

It was a Tuesday. He came back happy. "Ma'am, I learned English." They had taught him colors. His old school didn't have English.

By the next month, I had four "Bens."
Monday and Wednesday: Mateo.
Tuesday and Thursday: Leo, Ramón's nephew.
Friday: Santiago, Elsa's grandson, who stayed over at my place.
I charged $1,200 for each. $3,600 total. Plus the real tuition I wasn't paying, because Ben—the real one—had been in London with his father since April. Javier had taken him "to give him a future." He took him without telling me. He left the spot empty.

I filled it.

I made a new Excel.
Column A: Day.
Column B: Student.
Column C: Fake Name.
Column D: Payment.
Monday - Mateo - Ben - $1,200
Tuesday - Leo - Ben - $1,200

Wednesday - Mateo - Ben - $0 (already paid)
Thursday - Leo - Ben - $0
Friday - Santiago - Ben - $1,200

I was making $3,600. Ben's tuition was covered. I had enough left over to pay for Delia's.

The school didn't notice. Or they chose to ignore it. Sister Ingrid crossed me in the hall once. "Marcie, Ben is very... changeable," she said.
I said, "He's growing, Sister, it's a phase."
She looked at me weirdly. The "Ben" that day was Leo, who is dark-haired, while Ben is blond. But with the winter mask on, it passed.

Delia still went every day. She was actually her. But I started taking her less, because her Pre-K tuition was also going up. I left her with Elsa three days a week. Elsa taught her how to knit. At St. Agnes, they taught robotics. I don't know which is better.

In May, another email arrived. "Mandatory field trip to Washington D.C.: $450 per student." For Ben. I had three Bens. I charged the mothers $150 each for the trip. I collected $450. Paid the school $450. I kept the change. I put it in an envelope labeled "FUTURE."

The problem started when Mateo got sick. He missed a Monday. On Tuesday, Leo went, but the teacher asked why he didn't have Monday's homework. Leo didn't know. He said, "I forgot." The teacher wrote in the communication notebook: "Ben, disorganized." I signed it as the mother. I wrote, "We will work on it at home."

On Thursday, Mateo returned, but with a fever. The teacher sent him to the nurse. They called "the mother." They called me. I ran there. Mateo was in the infirmary, wearing Ben's uniform, sweating. The nurse said, "Ma'am, Ben has a 103-degree fever."
I looked at him. It wasn't Ben. It was Mateo.
I said, "Yes, he's my son." I took him home.

In the taxi, Mateo asked, "Am I Ben or am I Mateo?"
I said, "Today you're Mateo." He started to cry.

That night, I didn't sleep. I opened the Excel. I looked at Ben's row. I thought about my real son, in London, attending a public school there because Javier couldn't afford private school either. I thought about Mateo, who had used a computer in a classroom for the first time. I thought about Leo, who had learned to say "Good morning."

And I understood that I wasn't renting out a spot.

I was renting out the future. Because the only way my kids wouldn't be outcasts was if other kids used their names.

At 10:17 PM, my phone vibrated. It wasn't the school. It was a message from an unknown number.
"Marcie, this is Brian from Integral Educational Solutions. We saw your Excel. You have a 140% occupancy rate. Are you interested in the 'Integral Student' program?"

I read the message with Delia asleep next to me. I replied: "What do I have to do?"
He answered instantly: "You just need the uniform, a good attitude, and tolerance for guilt."

I said no. I had enough trouble just paying the tuition. Brian said, "Think about it." He didn't write again until the following week. That week, Delia threw up in class. The teacher called me. I said it was nerves. It wasn't nerves, it was stress.

I looked at Ben's blazer hanging in the closet. I looked at the envelope labeled "FUTURE." I looked at Delia.
And I knew the educational crisis wasn't that there were no schools.
It was that we had already privatized our own children's names.

The teacher asked me why Ben knew more English than Spanish. I didn't know what to say. Mateo was looking away. Later I found out Mateo was looking at the photo of the real Ben in the communication notebook. He wanted to know who owned his name.

I accepted Brian's deal. I signed on a napkin at the school cafe. With the same pen I used to sign Ben's report cards.

That week, St. Agnes sent me the June billing: $6,400 for both kids. Brian paid it before I even saw it. I got an email: "Payment received. Thank you, Sosa family."

I wasn't paying anymore. I was getting paid.

The system scaled. Brian sent me a shared Excel. He had 19 kids on the waitlist to be "Ben" or "Delia." He organized them by shifts, just like Ramón did with the porter's lodge.

1. Mon 8 AM-12 PM: Mateo (Ben)

2. Mon 1 PM-5 PM: Sofia (Delia, Pre-K)

3. Tue 8 AM-12 PM: Leo (Ben)

4. Tue 1 PM-5 PM: Santiago (Delia)
   And so on. The kids went by the hour, like therapy sessions. I received them at my house at 7:30 AM, put the uniform on them, gave them a lunchbox (which I bought with the surplus), and dispatched them to school. At pickup, I changed them back, returned their clothes, and the parents paid me in cash.

The school said nothing. Or didn't want to see. Sister Ingrid called me once. "Marcie, Delia is very tall for Pre-K." It was Sofia, who was 6 years old and tall. I said, "It's genetics, Sister, the father is 6'3"." She nodded.

In July, Brian asked me to optimize. "Marcie, the uniform is a fixed cost. Why don't we rent out the homework, the Flag Day ceremony, the parent-teacher conference?" I started selling packages.

- Basic Package: Spot per hour - $150
- Intermediate Package: Spot + homework done - $200
- Premium Package: Spot + homework + attending parent-teacher meeting as "Marcie" - $300

I went to parent-teacher meetings wearing a different wig each time. Once, I went as Ben's mom and Delia's mom on the same day. Nobody noticed. Everyone was looking at their phones checking the stock market.

The problem started when the integrated test arrived. Ben—the real one, in London—had to take it online. The school sent the link. I forwarded it to Javier. Javier said, "He can't, he has a fever." I said, "Then Mateo will take it." Mateo took it as Ben. He got an A in English. The teacher emailed me: "Congratulations, Ben is progressing." I forwarded the email to Javier. Javier replied: "Who is Mateo?"
I didn't answer.

In August, Delia—the real one—asked me, "Mom, why is there a girl wearing my apron at school?" It was Sofia. I said, "She's your cousin." She believed me.

That month, I billed $6,400. More than Javier was making in London delivering for Deliveroo. I sent him $500 to buy sneakers for Ben. He said, "Thanks, boss."

The Department of Education cited me in September. "Mrs. Sosa, we have 47 attendance records for Ben in 20 school days." I went with Elsa. I brought the printed Excel. I showed it to the inspector. "Sir, I'm not committing fraud, I'm doing collaborative inclusion." He looked at me like I was crazy. He said, "This is identity theft." I said, "No, it's the gig economy." He fined me. Brian

paid the fine.

The night of the fine, the whole building came to my apartment. Nora, Tano, Ramón, Gladys, Elsa. We held an assembly in the living room. I showed them the Excel. 19 kids, 2 spots, $6,400 a month.

Gladys said, "Marcie, you're selling their future."
I said, "Gladys, you sold your health."
Ramón said, "I sold my bed."
Nora said, "I sold the food."
Tano said, "I sold the vote."
Lucas said, "I sold my time."

We looked at each other. We laughed. Delia was asleep on the couch wearing Sofia's uniform.

I understood that the educational crisis wasn't that public schools were bad. It was that they had convinced us that if your kid didn't go to a private school, they were nobody. And to keep them from being nobody, we were willing to let them be someone else.

At 10:17 PM, my phone vibrated. It was Brian.
"Marcie, you've been promoted. 'Integral Mother' program. Now you don't rent the spot. You *are* the spot. We pay you to be the mother of 19 kids."

I replied: "Brian, I'm already a mother of two. And that's more than enough."
He blocked me.

The next day, I went to the school. I withdrew Ben and Delia. Sister Ingrid looked sad. "Marcie, where are you taking them?"
I said, "To the public school down the street, Sister. The one with the dirt yard and teachers paid in dollars."
She signed the transfer papers. I left with the two blue folders under my arm.

I arrived at the building. I went up to 6B. I put the St. Agnes uniforms in a bag. I went down and gave them to Mateo and Sofia. "They're yours now," I said. "Use them to play."

That afternoon, I enrolled Delia in P.S. 122, two blocks away. The principal said, "We don't charge tuition here, ma'am."
I said, "I know, that's why I'm here."

That night, I opened the Excel for the last time. I deleted all the rows. I left only one.
Column A: Delia
Column B: Public School
Column C: $0

Column D: Future

I saved it as "Educational_Crisis_FINAL.xlsx". I turned off the computer.

That night, Delia asked if she could wear the St. Agnes uniform again. I said no, we don’t go there anymore. She started to cry. "But I liked recess," she said. "They had juice boxes." I said the new school has juice boxes too. "But they’re powder," she said. I didn’t answer. She was right.

And for the first time in three years, I didn’t wake up at 10:17 PM waiting for the school’s email.

CLOTHING CRISIS

I didn't want to rent out my clothes.

I swear by the original Levi's 501s hanging in my closet since 2019, tags still on because I was too scared to wear them and ruin them. I didn't want to.

Three years ago, I was fine. I designed flyers for startups, got paid in USD via PayPal, and bought clothes on Zara's online Hot Sale. My closet had matching wooden hangers, just like Pinterest. I even had an Excel, but it was for outfits, not debts.

Column A: Item. Column B: Combination. Column C: each Occasion.

Then my own labor crisis hit, and the USD stopped coming. Then Nora's food crisis, and I started eating plain pasta. Then Tony's election crisis, and I voted in an old tee. Then Ray's housing crisis, and I moved into his superintendent's room when he got kicked out. Then Gladys's health crisis, and she lent me her insurance card for the gynecologist. Then Marcela's educational crisis, and she lent me Ben's private school blazer for an interview.

That interview was everything.

It was for a Junior Designer role at an agency in Manhattan. "Good social media skills, good presentation." Good presentation. I had that in 2021. In 2026, I had a pilled sweatshirt and sneakers with the sole peeling off.

I borrowed Marcela's blue blazer. I paired it with black jeans and a white tee. I looked in the superintendent's mirror. I looked like someone else.

I got the job. $3,500 a month, W-2. I came home happy. I took off the blazer and saw it: a tiny coffee stain on the lapel. I tried to wipe it with water. It spread.

I returned it to Marcela. She looked at it. Didn't say a word. Just sent me a Venmo request: "Dry cleaning: $18.00". I paid it. It left me with zero dollars for the subway.

That night, I opened my closet. I counted: 23 wearable items, 47 old items, 1 stained blazer that wasn't mine. I opened Excel. New table.

Column A: Item. Column B: Condition. Column C: Times worn. Column D: Replacement value.

Levi's 501s: New / 0 times / $98.00

Zara black blazer: Good / 4 times / $69. is $69.00

Floral dress: Fair / 12 times / $35.00

Total: $1,200 to replace what I owned. My salary: $3,500. It didn't add up.

The next day, Nora came over. "Sol, can I borrow something black? My husband's uncle's wake." I lent her the black dress. She returned it smelling like cigarettes with a wine stain. "I dropped a glass." I said, "It's fine." Inside, I thought: $18 dry cleaning.

That's when I understood. I wasn't lending clothes. I was lending money I didn't have.

So I professionalized it. Like everyone else in this building.

I posted an Instagram Story: "The Integral Closet – Outfit Rental Queens."

Photo of the Levi’s 501s hanging. Text: "Wear it, don’t buy it. $25/day."
Gladys DM’d me instantly. "Sol, I need a wool coat for my cardiologist appointment. I want them to think I have premium insurance." I rented her the coat for $15. She returned it with a cat hair on it. I charged her a $5 cleaning fee.
Then came Tony. "I need a white button-down for the community board debate." I rented him one. He returned it soaked in sweat. I washed it myself.
Then Marcela. "I need an outfit for the PTA meeting. I don’t want them to know I’m at the public school." I rented her the blazer—the same one she lent me—plus a handbag. $30.
In a month, I had 11 regular clients. All from the building, all with the same problem: they couldn’t afford new clothes, but they couldn’t repeat outfits in photos.
I made the ultimate Excel.
Column A: Item. Column B: Who has it. Column C: Event. Column D: Stain.
Wool coat - Gladys - cardiologist - cat hair
White shirt - Tony - debate - sweat
Blue blazer - Marcela - PTA meeting - none
Black dress - Nora - wake - wine
Levi’s 501s - Me - interview - none (yet)
I was making $250 a week. More than designing flyers.
The problem started when the clothes began to wear out. Clothes fade, stain, tear. And I couldn’t afford to replace them. A new pair of jeans at Zara Manhattan cost $80. I was charging $25 to rent them. I’d have to rent them out 4 times just to break even. By the 3rd time, they were already worn.
So I started buying at the local Goodwill. Second-hand clothes. I washed them, ironed them, and posted them on Instagram as "curated vintage." "Vintage floral dress – $20/day." It worked. Nobody noticed. Or they didn’t want to notice.
In May, my credit card statement arrived. I had bought a hair straightener on a 12-month 0% APR plan in 2024. The June payment: $15. But at the bottom, it said "Variable APR adjustment: +42%". The payment jumped to $22. I called the bank. "It’s the variable rate clause, ma’am." I hung up.
That night, I didn’t sleep. I opened the closet. I looked at the Levi’s 501s. Still with the tag. I thought about selling them. On Facebook Marketplace, they go for $100. With that, I could pay off the straightener and buy two dresses at Goodwill.
I didn’t sell them. I rented them. A girl from Astoria wanted them for a party. $25. I gave them to her. She sent me a photo that night: her at a club, wearing my jeans, with the tag cut off. She texted, "Sorry, it was bothering me." I said, "It’s fine." I wanted to die.
The next day, I washed them. The tag was gone. The jeans weren’t new anymore. They were used. Worth $30.
I understood then that I wasn’t renting clothes.

I was renting the illusion of being someone else. Because the only way my neighbors didn't look poor was if I looked rich. And I wasn't rich. I had a closet that was emptying out.

At 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. Not a client. A text from an unknown number.

"Sol, this is Brian from Integral Image Solutions. We saw your Excel. You have a 300% rotation rate. Are you interested in the 'Integral Wardrobe' program?"

I read the message holding the wet Levi's. I replied: "What do I have to do?"

He replied instantly: "You just need your body, good lighting, and tolerance to being used."

I looked in the superintendent's mirror. I saw myself in the pilled sweatshirt. I saw myself in the tagless jeans. I saw myself with 23 items that were no longer mine, because I'd rented them out so many times they smelled like other people's lives.

And I knew the clothing crisis wasn't that there were no clothes.

It was that we had stripped down to the bare minimum just to pretend we still had something to wear.

I said yes to Brian at 3:21 AM. He met me at a Starbucks in Astoria. He arrived with a rolling suitcase. "Sol, you don't sell clothes, you sell an image."

He opened the suitcase: 12 hangers with clothes, tags still on. Zara, H&M, Mango. All with the security alarms still attached.

"These are factory rejects," he said. "You can't sell them, but you can rent them. We give them to you, you rotate them, you get paid in USD." I asked if it was legal. He said, "It's as legal as a 0% APR trap."

I signed on his iPad. He gave me the suitcase. He gave me a handle: @integralcloset.nyc. It already had 3,400 followers.

That week, I stopped renting my clothes. I rented Brian's. They were new, smelling like a mall. The clients went crazy. Gladys rented a fake Max Mara coat for $45 to go to a fancy Italian restaurant. Nora rented a party dress for a friend's quinceañera—she wasn't even invited, she just went to take photos at the door. Marcela rented a power suit to go to a job interview.

I charged, Brian took 60%, I kept 40%. In USD. In one week, I made $150. More than a month of designing.

The system scaled. Brian sent me a shared Excel. It had 87 items, 34 clients, and a new column: "Content". I didn't just rent the clothes; I had to post photos of myself wearing them. "Sol, you are the model," he said. "People rent what they see on you."

I started taking photos in the superintendent's hallway, using the ring light the kid from 4B lent me. I'd post a story: "Look of the day – available." Within 10 minutes, I had three bookings.

The problem started when my body became the catalog. Because Brian didn't give me my size, he gave me "samples". All size Small. I'm a Medium. They fit tight. I held my breath to take the photos. Clients complained: "Sol, this is

too big for me." I'd say, "It's supposed to be oversized."
In July, Brian asked for more. "Sol, we need summer content in the middle of winter. Can you do a bikini shoot on the roof?" It was 35°F in New York. He paid me $50 per photo. I said yes. I went up to the building's roof in Brian's bikini, shivering, and took 20 photos. I posted them. I sold 12 rentals of that bikini in a week. Nobody wore it. They rented it just for the photo.
In August, the IRS summoned me. "Miss, you have unreported income in USD from digital image services." I went with Elsa. I brought the Excel. I showed it to the auditor. "Sir, I don't sell clothes, I rent self-esteem." He looked tired. He said, "This is a 1099 contractor issue." He registered me. Brian paid the registration fee.
That night, the whole building came to the superintendent's room. We held a fashion show. Each wearing a rented item. Gladys with the coat, Nora with the party dress, Marcela with the blazer, Elsa with a fake cashmere scarf, Tony with a leather jacket. I walked in the Levi's 501s—mine, the original, now tagless.
We looked at ourselves in the cracked mirror of the hallway. We looked rich. We looked like we belonged in Manhattan. We looked like something else.
Ray said, "Sol, you're selling illusions." I said, "Ray, you sold your bed."
Gladys said, "I sold my health." Marcela said, "I sold my kids' school." Nora said, "I sold the food." Tony said, "I sold the vote." The kid from 4B said, "I sold my time."
We laughed. Because if you don't laugh, you cry. And crying ruins your mascara, and the mascara was rented too.
In September, the inevitable happened: I ran out of body.
Brian called me. "Sol, we have a client in China who needs a size M model, 5'5", brown hair, for e-commerce photos. You don't have to do anything, just lend your image. We pay you $2,000 a month." I asked, "What do I have to do?" He said, "Nothing. We use your photos with AI, we digitally dress you."
I signed. He sent a contract in English. I signed it with my finger.
From that day on, "Sol" appeared on 43 Shein, Temu, and Amazon storefronts. Selling dresses I never touched, with my face, my body, the mole on my shoulder. My neighbors sent me screenshots: "Sol, you're in an ad." I'd say, "Yeah, I'm a model."
I made $2,000 a month without leaving the hallway. I stopped renting clothes. I rented my image. Brian kept 70%. I didn't care. It was easy money.
Until one day I went to the local thrift store to buy a shirt for myself. For me, for real. I found a nice one, $15. I tried it on. I looked in the mirror. I didn't recognize myself. The girl at the register said, "It looks great on you, it's your size." I said, "I don't know what my size is." She said, "You're a Medium." I said, "In the photos, I'm a Small."
I bought it anyway. I went back to the hallway. I put it on. I took a photo without a filter, without the ring light, without Brian's clothes. I posted it on my personal Instagram—not the @integralcloset.nyc account. I captioned it

"me." It got 12 likes. Brian's photos got 4,000.
That night, at 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. It was Brian.
"Sol, we have a problem. Your image is saturated. The client wants a new face. Are you interested in the 'Integral Body' program? We pay you to stop using your image and use someone else's."
I looked at it. I looked at the Levi's 501s hanging—the ones that started it all. I looked at Brian's suitcase full of clothes that weren't mine. I looked at the $15 thrifted shirt I bought for myself.
I replied: "Brian, my body isn't for rent anymore. It gets dressed. However I can, with what I have."
He blocked me.
The next day, I returned the suitcase. I closed the Excel. I deleted the @integralcloset.nyc Instagram account. I opened my closet. I counted: 14 items of my own, all used, all stained, all real.
I put on the pilled sweatshirt. I went down to the hallway. They were all there. Nora, Gladys, Marcela, Elsa, Ray, Tony. All in rented clothes, except me.
I said, "Girls, the rental is over." They looked at me. Nora took off the party dress and stood in her tee. Gladys took off the coat. Marcela took off the blazer.
We stayed in the hallway, in our pajamas, drinking mate. We looked poor. Because we were. And for the first time, we didn't care.
I saved the Excel as "Clothing_Crisis_FINAL.xlsx". In the last row, I wrote:
Item: Me
Condition: Used
Times worn: My whole life
Value: Not for sale
And I understood that the clothing crisis wasn't about not having clothes. It was about believing that clothes made us someone.

COMMUNICATION CRISIS

I didn’t want to rent out my Wi-Fi.
I swear by the Xfinity modem I’ve had since 2019, with the password "Luke1234" that I never changed because everyone in the building knows it. I didn’t want to.

Three years ago, I was fine. Gaming laptop, 300 Mbps plan, unlimited data on my phone. I worked as a community manager, got paid in USD via PayPal, and played *Warzone* until 3 AM. I had an Excel, but it was for K/D ratios, not debts.

Then my own labor crisis hit, and I started selling hours. Then Nora’s food crisis, and I let her use my DoorDash discount. Then Tony’s election crisis, and I lent him my phone to vote in his fake poll. Then Ray’s housing crisis, and he connected to my Wi-Fi from the lobby. Then Gladys’s health crisis, and I lent her my email to get her medical results. Then Marcie’s educational crisis, and I lent her my laptop so her kid could take a test. Then Sol’s clothing crisis, and I let her use my Instagram to post photos.

I was the building’s server.

Everything started in February, when I got the email from Xfinity. "Plan update: +68%. Your $59.99/month becomes $99.99." I read it while playing. I lost the match. I called. "It’s inflation, sir." I hung up.

That month I couldn’t pay. They throttled my speed. From 300 Mbps to 10 Mbps. My *Warzone* ping hit 400. I couldn’t work. I couldn’t sell hours. I couldn’t do anything.

I went down to the landing. Everyone was there. Nora, Ray, Gladys, Marcie, Sol, Tony.
"Luke, the Wi-Fi is down," Nora said.
I told them I didn’t pay. They looked at me like I had cut off their water.
Ray said, "Luke, I’ll give you $5 if I can check my Chase account to see if my deposit hit."
I gave him the password. He connected. Then came Gladys. "I need to email my doctor." $5. Then Marcie. "My kid has a Zoom class." $5. Then Sol. "I need to upload content." $5.

In one afternoon, I made $20. With that, I paid half the Wi-Fi bill.

I opened Excel. Like everyone else.
Column A: Neighbor. Column B: Hours. Column C: Payment. Column D: Activity.

Ray - 2h - $5 - home banking
Gladys - 1h - $5 - email
Marcie - 3h - $5 - Zoom
Sol - 4h - $5 - Instagram

The next day, I put a sign in the elevator: "LUKE'S WIFI – $2/hour – Venmo only." By noon, I had a waiting list.

The problem wasn't the money. It was the bandwidth. With 10 Mbps, if three people connected, none of them worked. So I started selling time slots. 8-10 AM: Nora. 10-12: Ray. 12-2: Gladys. 2-4: Marcie. 4-6: Sol. 6-8: Tony. 8-10: Me.

I ended up with no internet in my own apartment.

In March, another email arrived. "Your plan has been suspended for non-payment." I was at zero. I went to the Xfinity store downtown. There were 40 people in line. All to cancel. I got to the front. "Do you want to cancel?" I said, "No, I want to pay." They looked at me weird. I paid $99.99. They reactivated it. I went home. Plugged in the modem. It worked.

I went upstairs. Everyone was waiting at my door. "Luke, is it back?" I said yes. They applauded.

That night I did the math. If I charged $2 an hour, 12 hours a day, 30 days, that was $720. The plan cost $99.99. I had $620 left over. More than I made selling hours on apps.

I professionalized it. I bought a Wi-Fi extender on Amazon, in 12 monthly installments. I put it in the 2nd-floor landing. The signal reached the whole building. I changed the password to "Luke2026". I sold it by the day: $5/day, $25/week, $80/month.

By April, I had 19 clients. The whole building. Even the super connected.

The problem started when they asked for more than Wi-Fi.
Gladys said, "Luke, can I borrow your laptop to do my Medicare portal? Mine is broken." I lent it to her. $10/hour.
Then Marcie: "Can I borrow your iPhone so my kid can take a test? Mine doesn't have a camera." $5.
Then Sol: "Can I borrow your Gmail account? Mine is locked." $5.

I opened another Excel. "Device Rental."
Laptop - Gladys - 2h - $20
Phone - Marcie - 1h - $5
Gmail - Sol - 1 day - $5

In May, Tony asked for the worst. "Luke, can I borrow your Social Security Number to open a Chime account? I'm on the credit blacklist."
I said no. He offered $50 cash. I said yes. I sent him a photo of the front and back of my Driver's License, and my SSN. He opened the account. Three days later, notifications exploded on my phone: "Your $5,000 personal loan at Chime has been approved."
It wasn't mine. It was his, under my name.

I went to Tony's apartment. "Close that account."
He said, "I can't, I already spent it on the campaign."
I said, "You're going to ruin me."
He said, "We're already ruined."

That night I didn't sleep. I opened my phone. I had 43 active sessions in Gmail. 12 in Amazon. 7 in the IRS portal. 3 in ID.me. I didn't know which ones were mine.

At 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. Not a notification. A text.
"Luke, this is Brian from Integral Communications Solutions. We saw your Excel. You have a 98% connectivity rate. Interested in the 'Integral User' program?"

I read the message with the modem blinking in the dark. I replied: "What do I have to do?"
He replied instantly: "Just need your SSN, your FaceID, and tolerance to not being you."

I looked at the router. I looked at the laptop. I looked at my phone with 43 sessions.
And I knew the communication crisis wasn't that there was no internet.
It was that we had already sold the password just to stay connected.

I said yes to Brian. He didn't meet me at a café. He sent a Zoom link. I joined from the building's laptop—the one that was no longer mine, it belonged to everyone. Brian had a virtual background of a Miami office.

"Luke, you don't sell gigs, you sell identity." He showed me a dashboard. My SSN, my Gmail (luke.4b@gmail.com), my YouTube history, my Amazon account with 187 purchases, my ID.me Level 3 verification. All with a price tag next to them.

"Your user profile is worth $1,200 a month," he said. "Because you have seniority since 2014, a good credit score, and you were never delinquent until 2024."
I asked what I had to do. "Nothing. Keep living. We use your identity in parallel."

I signed with my fingerprint—the same one I used to unlock my phone. He transferred $300 in USDT as an advance.

That week I stopped renting the Wi-Fi. I rented my name.

Brian sent me a shared Excel, but it wasn't mine, it was theirs.
Column A: Client. Column B: Service. Column C: My Data Used. Column D: Payment.
Client 1 - Upgrade Loan - My SSN - $15
Client 2 - DoorDash Account - My email - $5
Client 3 - Airbnb Verification - My selfie - $20

I didn't see the clients. I only saw the deposits. In one week I made $680. More than I made selling hours on the app.

The problem started when I tried to log into my own bank. I entered my username, my password. "Incorrect password." I clicked "forgot password." They sent the code to my email. I logged into the email. I had 3,400 unread messages. All "Welcome", "Confirm your account", "Your loan was approved". They weren't mine.

I recovered the password. I logged into the bank. I had three pre-approved loans under my name. One for $8,000 from Chime, another for $6,000 from Affirm, another for $3,500 from Capital One. I hadn't asked for them. Brian had, with my face.

I called Brian. "Relax, Luke, it's part of the model. You get 20% of each loan."
I said, "I don't want loans."
He said, "They aren't for you, they're for the clients. You just rent the history."

I hung up. I went to the lobby bathroom—where Sol lived now. I looked in the mirror. My face was on 43 accounts.

In August, the IRS summoned me. "Mr. Luke, you reported $45,000 in digital services income." I hadn't invoiced anything. Brian had, using my tax ID. I went with Elsa to a tax prep office downtown. The accountant looked at Brian's Excel. "Kid, you sold your identity."
I said, "I rented it."
He said, "Same thing, but worse."
He registered me as a 1099 independent contractor. Category: "Data processing services." Brian paid the registration fee.

That night the whole building came to my room. It was the first time they had all been in 4B together since I started selling hours. I showed them the

dashboard. 87 people using my Gmail, 43 using my SSN, 12 using my selfie for Tinder.

Ray said, "Luke, you're selling your soul."
I said, "Ray, you sold your bed."
Gladys said, "I sold my health."
Marcie said, "I sold my kids' school."
Nora said, "I sold the food."
Sol said, "I sold my clothes."
Tony said, "I sold my vote."

We looked at each other. I was 24 years old and I no longer had a name.

In September, the inevitable happened: I ran out of myself.
I tried to book a dentist appointment via the SSA portal. I entered my SSN. "User blocked due to multiple attempts." I called support. A robot answered: "Your identity is being used in another session." I hung up.

I tried to open Instagram. "Your account has been suspended for unusual activity." It was my 2014 account, with photos from my high school graduation. Brian had used it to sell crypto trading courses.

I tried to open WhatsApp. It asked for two-step verification. I entered my code. "Incorrect code." Someone had changed it.

I was left without a phone, without email, without a bank, without social media. I only had the old laptop I rented out by the hour. I turned it on. The screen was black. I only saw my reflection.

At 3:17 AM, the laptop vibrated. It was an email—the last one I could open. From Brian.
"Luke, you've been promoted. 'Premium Integral User' program. Now you don't rent your identity. You *are* the identity of others. We pay you $3,000 a month to stop existing digitally."

I replied from the library computer downtown—the last one in Queens, charging $2 for half an hour: "Brian, I don't want money. I want my name." He replied instantly: "Your name is worth nothing. It's worth more rented."

I turned off the computer. Paid the $2. Went out to the street. It was 4 AM in Astoria. Everything closed, everything with free Wi-Fi that I couldn't use because I had no user.

I went back to the building. Went up to 4B. Opened my original Excel, the one for hours sold. I deleted it. I made a new one.
Column A: Luke
Column B: SSN

Column C: Gmail
Column D: Status: "In recovery"

The next day I went to the DMV. I requested a new ID. "I lost the previous one," I lied. They took my photo. I left with the receipt. It was the first photo of me in three years that Brian wasn't going to use.

I went to Xfinity. I cancelled the plan. I got a prepaid TracFone SIM under my mom's name. I bought a used basic flip phone for $20. It only makes calls and receives texts.

I went back to the building. I told everyone: "Free Wi-Fi is over." They protested. I showed them the flip phone. "If you need me, call me." They laughed. Then they understood.

That night, for the first time in two years, I didn't wake up at 3:17 AM to a notification. I woke up at 7 AM because the flip phone alarm went off. It was horrible. It was mine.

I saved the Excel as "Communication_Crisis_FINAL.xlsx". I put it on a USB drive. I locked it in the drawer.

And I understood that the communication crisis wasn't losing the internet. It was having believed that to exist, I needed to be connected. And when I sold my connection, I sold the only thing that couldn't be rented: my name.

HOUSING CRISIS

I didn’t want to rent out my own super’s room.
I swear by the master key hanging next to the fire extinguisher that expired in 2017. I didn’t want to.
Three years ago, I was fine. I had my 3x3 meter room behind the elevator, with a two-burner stove, a bathroom where the water heater only worked if you kicked it, and a 14-inch TV that only picked up local news. I got paid a steady W-2 salary, my rent was deducted from my paycheck, and the neighbors left me leftovers. Nora brought me meals, Tony gave me cigarettes on credit, and Elsa asked me to carry her groceries.
Then the labor crisis hit, and the new LLC management cut me to part-time. Then the food crisis hit, and the neighbors stopped having parties. And now, this.
It all started in February, when Gus, the property manager for the LLC that bought the building, called me to his "office" (the 8th-floor landing where he keeps the files).
"Ray, we have a cash flow problem. The maintenance fees aren’t covering it. How much do you pay in rent for the super’s room?"
I said, "Nothing, Gus. It’s part of the salary. It’s in my 1998 contract."
He showed me an Excel sheet. "Exactly. That’s a taxable fringe benefit. Starting this month, the room has a market value of $1,200. We’ll deduct it from your paycheck."
I told him that left me with $600 to live on. He said, "Then you’re privileged. You get to live in Astoria for $600."
I accepted. I had nowhere else to go. My credit score was 580 since my divorce.
The next month, the LLC raised the "market value" of the room to $1,500. "Real estate inflation," Gus said. I started falling behind.
To pay, I started renting the room by the hour on Craigslist. First to local couples who needed a place to go. I charged $40 an hour, clean sheets included. Then to gig workers who needed a nap between DoorDash or Amazon Flex shifts. I charged $25 an hour, no sheets.
The LLC found out. Gus sent me a certified Notice to Quit. "Improper use of common areas and illegal subletting." I showed him my contract. He said, "That statute of limitations expired, Ray. You have 30 days to vacate."
That’s when I knew space isn’t inhabited. It’s billed.
If they kicked me out, I’d leave. But a super’s room in Astoria is gold. Not for living, but for storing things. People don’t have space for their bikes, skateboards, or the Amazon boxes they buy and never open. So I did what any super with 20 years of seniority and a master key would do: I sublet the room before they evicted me.
I posted it on Facebook Marketplace. "Cozy micro-studio, Astoria. Shared boiler ambiance. 24/7 Super on-site (me). $300/week or $40/night." I used

filtered photos. People asked: "Does it have a balcony?" I said, "It has a window to the hall, which is like an internal balcony." They asked: "Pets?" I said, "I accept dogs, cats, and UberEats drivers."

The first to come was a remote programmer paid in crypto. He offered $400 a month. I gave him the key. That night I slept in the boiler room, on top of the water heater.

The next day, a designer who got divorced and couldn't afford her Bushwick studio came. She offered $350. I gave her the same key. I said, "You're sharing with the guy, it's like co-living but for survival."

On the third day, José, a Venezuelan Amazon Flex driver, came. He offered $200 a month. I gave him the same key.

By Friday, I had seven tenants in a 3x3 meter room. They slept in shifts. I made an Excel sheet, just like Nora.

Column A: Name.

Column B: Shift.

Column C: Payment (Zelle/Venmo).

Column D: Notes.

Martin (programmer) - 10 PM to 6 AM - $400 - "Snores."

Sol (designer) - 6 AM to 2 PM - $350 - "Leaves hair on the pillow."

José (Amazon Flex) - 2 PM to 10 PM - $200 - "Arrives late, smells like cardboard."

I was billing more than Gus.

The LLC found out, obviously. Gus called me at 10:17 PM. "Ray, what are you doing?"

I said, "Optimizing assets, Gus. Just like you do with the LLC fees."

He threatened me with an eviction lawsuit. I said, "Do it. I don't have an address to serve the papers anyway."

One night, during the shift change between Sol and José, the power went out. The water heater made a noise like it was exploding. Hot water flooded the entire hall. The seven tenants ran out into the hallway in their underwear. The neighbors came down. Nora yelled, "The meals are flooded!" Tony yelled, "It's electoral sabotage!" Elsa yelled, "Call Brian!"

Gus came down in his bathrobe. He looked at me. I had the master key in my hand, the Excel on my phone, and seven people paying me to sleep in my bed.

"Ray," he said, "this is a housing crisis."

I said, "No, Gus. This is a side hustle."

That night I slept in the hallway with a blanket. I looked at the water-stained ceiling. I thought about my little room, which was no longer mine. I thought about the seven people sleeping inside, in shifts. I thought about the Excel. And I understood that the crisis wasn't that there was nowhere to live.

It was that we had already rented out every last corner. And now, the only thing left to rent was ourselves.

At 10:17 PM, my phone vibrated. A message from Brian.

"Ray, this is Brian from Integral Housing Solutions. We saw your Excel. You

have a 94% occupancy rate in a non-zoned space. Are you interested in the 'Resident Manager Plus' program?"
I replied at 10:18 PM: "What is Resident Manager Plus?"
He sent a 12-page PDF I didn't open. At the bottom it said: "We pay in USDT. You just need your Driver's License, good attitude, and tolerance for co-living."
The next morning I went to Brian's office. It wasn't an office; it was a co-working space in Long Island City that he rented by the hour, just like I rented my room. He greeted me with pod coffee.
"Ray, you have something nobody else has: real housing stock. Not apartments, shifts." He showed me a graph. I appeared as a "high-rotation asset."
He offered me $1,500 a month. For me. Not for the room, for my physical presence.
"You become the legal tenant of your own super's room. You sign a lease, you pay rent, and we sublet to seven more people. It's win-win."
I said, "I already do that."
He said, "Yes, but now it's legal. Or almost."
I signed. With the same pen I used to sign the cleaning logs.
That afternoon, Gus officially evicted me from my role as Super. He put a digital lock on the super's room door. I had the master key, obviously. I went in anyway. But now I had a tenant contract. I paid rent to Brian, Brian paid the LLC, the LLC paid my Super salary, and I paid myself with what was left. It was a perfect circle of fraud.
The business scaled. Brian asked me to optimize. "Ray, 3x3 is small. What about the hallway? The roof? The boiler room?" I started lotting the building.
2nd-floor hallway: $100/month, "internal balcony with elevator view."
Space under the stairs: $50/month, "ideal for students or gig workers."
Roof, tank sector: $80/month, "panoramic view, no roof."
My bed, graveyard shift: $25/hour.
I made a new Excel. I had 34 rows. I was billing more than the entire building combined.
Nora rented me the 5th-floor nook to store her meal freezer. Tony rented the boiler room to count votes. Elsa rented the hallway for senior center meetings. Everyone paid me, I paid Brian, Brian paid Gus.
One night, it was completely full. I had nowhere to sleep. I tried the space under the stairs, but José was there. I tried the roof, but it was raining. I tried my own bed, but Martin the programmer was snoring.
I went to sleep in the elevator. I put down a blanket, pressed the "stop" button, and stayed between the 3rd and 4th floors. It was warm, it vibrated nicely. At 10:17 PM, Brian woke me up on WhatsApp: "Ray, how's the occupancy?" I sent him a photo of the elevator ceiling. He replied: "That's housing innovation."
The next week, the Department of Buildings came for an inspection. Gus had

called them. They walked in with hard hats. "Do you live here?" they asked while I was hanging from the elevator door frame.
"No, I work here," I said.
"Then where do you live?"
I opened the Excel on my phone. I showed them row 34: "Elevator - Ray - $0 - occupied." They didn't understand a thing. They fined me $500.
To pay the fine, I had to rent myself out. Literally. I listed myself in the Excel as a tenant of the elevator. I charged myself $20 a night. I paid myself with the money Brian paid me for renting myself. It was an infinite loop.
On the last day of the month, I did the balance. I had 34 tenants, 12 spaces, 1 elevator, and 0 places to live. I opened the super's fridge—which was no longer mine—and found half a lemon, an expired yogurt from Nora, and the St. Jude magnet my mom left me.
I understood that the housing crisis wasn't that there were no houses.
It was that we had already rented out the air. We had lotted the hallway, the roof, the elevator, the super's room, and in the end, we had lotted ourselves. I was a tenant in my own life, paying rent I couldn't afford, to a landlord who was me, but under a different name.
At 10:17 PM, I got the last message from Brian: "Ray, we've promoted you to 'Integral Property'. Now you are the real estate. We pay in USDT."
I looked at the master key hanging next to the expired fire extinguisher. The key that opened every door. Except mine.
I put it in my pocket. I turned off the hallway light. I lay down on the stairwell landing, between the 2nd and 3rd floors.
In the morning, Gladys found me on the landing. She said, "Ray, your face is yellow."
I told her it was the reflection of the emergency light. It wasn't. It was because I hadn't slept in a bed in three days. But the bed was rented. And the one renting it was paying.
And for the first time in three years, I slept without paying rent.
Because I no longer had anywhere to drop dead. And in Queens, that's a luxury.

JUDICIAL CRISIS

I didn't want to rent out my lawsuit.

I swear by the blue vinyl folder I've had since 2018, labeled "ELSA M. v. SOCIAL SECURITY ADMIN. / DISABILITY APPEAL" in my best handwriting. I didn't want to.

Eight years ago, I was fine. I collected my teacher's pension. I had my lawyer, Ms. Giménez, who took a 20% contingency fee when the case settled. I believed in the Justice System. I even had an Excel, but it was for medications, not debts.

Then my own crisis hit, and my pension froze. Then Lucas's labor crisis, and I helped him fill out his FAFSA. Then Nora's food crisis, and I co-signed her SNAP application. Then Tony's election crisis, and I lent him my ID for voter registration. Then Ray's housing crisis, and I let him use my address for court notices. Then Gladys's health crisis, and I wrote her Medicare appeal. Then Marcie's educational crisis, and I drafted her kid's IEP letter. Then Sol's clothing crisis, and I lent her my tenant rights template. Then Luke's communication crisis, and I helped him recover his ID.me account.

I was the building's free legal aid.

Everything started in March "Elsa, your SSDI backpay claim won in the first instance. You're owed $45, and the judge awarded attorney fees." I cried. She said, "But the SSA appealed. We have to wait for the Administrative Law Judge. Two more years." I asked how much I owed her. "Nothing yet, Elsa. When you get paid, 20%."

I left the office. I went to the SSA field office in Jamaica, Queens. There were 80 people in line since 4 AM. I got in line. At 9 AM, they called me. "What do you need?" "To see my file." "You have to schedule an appointment online." I scheduled one for 45 days from now.

I went back to the building. I ran into Nora in the elevator. "Elsa, do you know how to write a legal letter?" I said yes. "It's to appeal my SNAP denial." I wrote it that night on my old Olivetti typewriter. She paid me with two meals.

The next day, Marcie came. "Elsa, can you write a note to the school?" I did. She paid me $20. Then Gladys. "Elsa, can you write a Medicare appeal?" I did. She paid me $30.

I opened Excel. Like everyone else.

Column A: Neighbor.

Column B: Task.

Column C: Agency.

Column D: Payment.

Nora - SNAP appeal - DHS - 2 meals

Marcie - IEP letter - DOE - $20

Gladys - Medicare appeal - CMS - $30

By April, I had 14 clients. The whole building. I stood in line at the SSA, the DMV, Housing Court. I charged $50 to hold a spot. I woke up at 3 AM, took the E train, arrived at 4 AM, and was number 3. I sold my spot in line for $40. Then I stayed and made another line for another neighbor.

I was making $800 a month. More than my pension.

The problem started when they asked for more than lines. Tony said, "Elsa, can I use your SSN to open an LLC?" I said no. He offered me $200. I said yes. I lent him my SSN. He opened "Tony Construction LLC." Two months later, I got an IRS notice. "You owe $4,500 in unpaid taxes." I went to see him. "Tony, close it." He said, "I can't. I already sold it."

I went to Ms. Giménez. I showed her the notice. She said, "Elsa, you sold your fiscal identity." I said, "I rented it." She said, "It's the same thing." She charged me $150 for the consultation.

In May, I got the notice for my own case. "Administrative Law Judge hearing scheduled for 11/12/2027." Two and a half more years. I called my lawyer. "Elsa, it's normal." I hung up.

That night, I didn't sleep. I opened my blue folder. It had 247 pages. I counted them. Each page was a year of waiting. I did the math. If I got paid in 2027, with inflation, the $45,000 would be worth maybe $30,000 in real purchasing power. My lawyer would take $6,000. I'd be left with $24,000. Eleven years of lawsuit to buy a used car.

At 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. It was an email.

"Dear Elsa, this is Brian from Integral Judicial Solutions. We saw your docket. You have a 98% wait rate. Are you interested in the 'Integral Justice' program?"

I read the email with the blue folder on my lap. I replied: "What do I have to

do?"

He replied instantly: "You just need your file, your signature, and tolerance to let someone else collect."

He met me at the diner outside the Queens County Courthouse. He brought a tablet. "Elsa, we buy your lawsuit. We pay you $2,000 USD cash today. You assign us the rights. When the judge rules in 2027, we collect." I asked if it was legal. He said, "It's as legal as standing in line at 4 AM."

I signed. With my best handwriting. The same one from the folder label.

He transferred $2,000 in USDT to a Trust Wallet right there. I didn't understand it, but the cash equivalent was enough to pay the building's HOA fees for six months.

I went back to the building. I paid the HOA for everyone for three months. I told them, "It's a subsidy." They applauded. Ray cried. Nora made me lasagna. Gladys got me an appointment with her cardiologist. Marcie made me Ben's godmother. Sol lent me a dress. Luke gave me free Wi-Fi for life. Tony voted for me.

I felt like a judge.

Until June, when I got a letter from the SSA. "Dear Ms. Elsa M., we inform you that your claim has been assigned to Integral Judicial Solutions SA. You are no longer a party to this case."

I went to the courthouse. I asked to see my file. The clerk said, "It's not under your name." I showed him my ID. He said, "It's under Brian's name." I said, "Brian isn't a person." He said, "In the justice system, whoever pays is a person."

I walked out to the street. It was 11 AM. There were 90 people in line. They recognized me. "Elsa, can you hold my spot?" I told them no. "Why?" I said, "Because I don't have a lawsuit anymore."

I went back to the building. I opened my Excel. I added a row.

Column A: Elsa

Column B: SSDI Appeal

Column C: Administrative Law Judge

Column D: Sold

And I understood that I wasn't renting out my legal experience.

I was renting out the last thing I had left: the hope that someone would listen to me.

I said yes to Brian at 3:21 AM. He didn't meet me at a café. He met me at the SSA field office at 6 AM. He arrived with a briefcase.

"Elsa, you don't have a lawsuit, you have an asset," he said. He opened the briefcase. There was a tablet with a contract. "Assignment of Litigious Rights. You sell me your 2018 file, I pay you $2,000 cash today, and when the judgment comes out in 2029, I collect."

I asked if it was legal. He said, "It's as legal as paying a filing fee just to be heard."

I signed with my usual signature, the one I learned in normal school in 1972. He transferred $2,000 USD on the spot.

With that money, I paid three months of HOA fees for the whole building. Gustavo, the property manager, made me a receipt with a seal. "Neighbor Elsa, hero of the HOA." I taped it to the fridge.

I stopped going to court. Why bother? It wasn't my lawsuit anymore. Brian emailed me every six months: "Your asset is still in progress." I archived it.

In 2026, Nora asked me to write a SNAP appeal. I said, "I don't do paperwork anymore." She offered me two meals a week. I accepted. I wrote it. We lost.

In 2027, Marcie asked me to get an appointment with the child advocate. I said, "I don't have contacts anymore." She offered me Ben's school blazer. I accepted. We got nothing.

In 2028, Ray asked me to draft a cease-and-desist letter to his landlord. I said, "I don't draft anymore." He offered to iron my sheets for a month. I accepted. The letter never arrived.

I was no longer the building's advocate. I was the retiree who had sold her only capital: the wait.

In March 2029, I got a certified letter. It wasn't for me. It was from Brian. "Dear Elsa: we inform you that Claim 2018-44892 has been resolved favorably. Amount awarded: $82,000.00. Said amount has been transferred to the assignee's account per contract dated 06/14/2026. Thank you for your trust."

I went to the Queens County Courthouse. I stood in the 4 AM line, like before. I got to the clerk's window. The girl knew me.

"Elsa, what are you doing here? Your case was paid out."

I said, "I want to see the judgment." She printed it. $82,000. In my name, but with a footnote: "Rights assigned to Integral Judicial Solutions LLC."

I asked, "Can I appeal?" She said, "Appeal what? You sold it."

I walked out to the courthouse steps. I sat down. I opened my old Excel, the one for paperwork. I opened the last sheet.

Column A: Own Lawsuit

Column B: Sold

Column C: Price: $2,000

Column D: Real Value: $82,000

I did the math. I had sold eleven years of my pension for the price of three months of HOA fees.

I went back to the building. I went up to 2B. They were all in the hallway, as always. Waiting for me.

"Elsa, how did it go?" Nora asked.

I showed them the judgment. "I won," I said. "Eighty-two thousand dollars."

Everyone applauded. Sol hugged me. Luke asked for a loan. Tony asked me to vote for him.

I said, "It’s not mine. It’s Brian’s."

They went quiet.

Ray said, "Elsa, you were always the one with the papers." I said, "Now the papers belong to someone else."

Gustavo took out the HOA ledger. "Neighbor, do you want us to make a note of this?"

I dictated: "Being 3:17 PM on March 12, sp>

CULTURAL CRISIS

I didn’t want to rent out my culture.

I swear by my Queens Public Library card, laminated since 2011, with my photo from when I still dyed my hair. I didn’t want to.

Five years ago, I was fine. Benicio was at St. Agnes Academy. Tuition was $180,000 pesos equivalent, but manageable. I had a season subscription to Lincoln Center. I was a member of the book club at the local indie bookstore in Astoria. I even had an Excel, but it was for books read, not debts.

Then my own crisis hit—the educational one—and I pulled Benicio out of St. Agnes. Then Lucas’s labor crisis, and I lent him my Kindle account. Then Nora’s food crisis, and I lent her my cookbooks so she could sell "gourmet" meals. Then Tony’s election crisis, and I lent my signature for the neighborhood association ballot. Then Ramón’s housing crisis, and I let him use my country club address for mail. Then Gladys’s health crisis, and I lent her my private school health insurance card. Then Sol’s clothing crisis, and I lent her my St. Agnes blazer for interviews. Then Lucas’s communication crisis, and I lent him my email to subscribe to Scribd. Then Elsa’s judicial crisis, and I lent her my law school notes for her injunction.

I was the building’s library. For free.

It all started in February 2025, when I went to renew my Lincoln Center subscription. "Ma'am, it’s $890 a month." In 2022, it was $120. I told the girl, "Can you put it in 12 installments?" She said, "It’s already in 12 installments, ma'am." I didn’t renew.

That night, Benicio asked me, "Mom, when are we going back to the theater?"

I said, "When inflation drops."

He looked at me like I had just said, "When Menem comes back."

The next day, I went to the Queens Library to return Rayuela. The librarian said, "Marcela, you have a $45 fine." I paid it. She said, "Do you want to renew your card?" I said yes. She renewed it for free. I walked out with the card in my hand. At the door, Sol stopped me.

"Marce, can I borrow your card? I need to check out a book for an Instagram photo."

I said, "What book?"

"Anything, as long as it looks intellectual."

I lent it to her. She checked out Love in the33 Time of Cholera. She didn't read it. She posted the photo. She got 340 likes. She paid me $20.

I opened Excel. Like everyone else.

Column A: Activity.

Column B: Client.

Column C: Price.

Column D: IG Photo.

Library card - Sol - $20 - yes

Theater ticket (photo only) - Nora - $30 - yes

Benicio's English notes - Ramón - $15 - no

In March, I professionalized it. I went to Lincoln Center exactly once, with a comp ticket Elsa gave me. I took 47 photos. In the hall, in the seat, with the program, with the curtain. I saved them in a folder: "Culture Stock 2025".

I started selling them. $25 a photo. "Night at the theater", "Culture is non-negotiable", "Back to the stage". Nora bought three. Tony bought five for his campaign. Gladys bought one to send to her cardiologist so he'd think she went out.

In April, I rented out Benicio. Not literally. I offered him as a "bilingual child for events". $50 an hour. He went to birthday parties in Manhattan and said, "Hello, my name is Benicio, I am nine years old." The parents took photos. "Private school kids speak so well." Benicio didn't go to private school anymore, he went to the public school down the street, but the accent stuck.

I was billing $1,200 a month. More than I made at the call center.

The problem started when they asked for more than photos. A mom from a nearby gated community said, "Marcela, will you sell me your Goodreads history?"

I said, "How?"

"I want to look like a reader. I'll pay you $20 a month, and you give me your read books."

I gave her my account. I had 187 books. She posted one a week as if she had

read it. She never read a single page.

Then another mom asked for my Spotify account. "I want my Wrapped to be jazz and classical, not Bad Bunny." I rented it to her for $80 a month. My Spotify started recommending reggaeton.

In May, Brian wrote to me. Not at 3:17 AM, but at 3:17 PM, siesta time.

"Marcela, this is Brian from Integral Cultural Solutions. We saw your Excel. You have a 94% cultural capital rate. Are you interested in the 'Integral Culture' program?"

I replied: "What do I have to do?"

He sent a contract. "We use your name, your theater photo, your library card, your old Book Fair posts. We create 200 profiles of cultured Queens mothers. You get $1,500 a month. You do nothing."

I signed with my finger on Lucas's phone. He paid the first month. $1,500 USD. With that, I paid off Benicio's school debt, bought real books, and went to the theater once, for real.

Until June, when I went to the Library to check out Ficciones. I swiped my card. The librarian scanned it. "Marcela, this card has 47 active loans."

I said, "Impossible, I only checked out one."

She showed me the screen. 47 books checked out across 12 different branches. Love in the Time of Cholera, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Rayuela, all under my name. All by Brian.

I said, "That wasn't me."

She said, "The card is yours." She charged me a $680 fine.

I walked out. I sat in Astoria Park. I opened Instagram. I searched #QueensCulture. There were 200 accounts with my Lincoln Center photo. All of them with my quotes: "Culture is non-negotiable." "Reading is resistance." "Benicio loves Shakespeare." None of them were mine.

I called Brian. "Brian, you're using me."

He said, "Marcela, you rented me your culture. I'm using it."

I said, "I want to cancel."

He said, "You have a 24-month contract."

I went back to the building. I opened my Excel. I added a row.

Column A: Culture

Column B: Marcela

Column C: Rented

Column D: No longer mine

And I understood that I wasn't renting out books or photos.

I was renting out the last lie we had left: that we were cultured because we once were.

I said yes to Brian at 3:17 PM because that's when Benicio had English tutoring and I had time. I didn't know that signing that contract was signing my cultural death certificate.

The first month, I made $1,500. I went to Lincoln Center for real. I bought the cheapest ticket, $150, paradise balcony, row 28. I took Benicio. We saw The House of Bernarda Alba. Benicio fell asleep. I cried. Not because of the play, but because of me. Because it was the first time in two years I was in a theater without taking photos to sell.

I walked out. At the door, an usher stopped me. "Ma'am, your QR code has been used 47 times this month."

I showed her my paper ticket. She said, "No, your digital season pass."

I said, "I don't have a season pass."

She showed me the tablet. My ID, my face, my name: "Marcela R., Integral Pass 2025". Tickets used at 12 different performances. I had only been to one.

It was Brian.

I called Brian that night. "You're stealing from me."

He said, "I'm renting from you. It's different."

I said, "I want my name back."

He said, "Your name is worth more on 200 accounts than on one."

The next day, I went to the Astoria Bookshop. I stood at the local author table. The girl recognized me. "Marcela, are you here to sign copies?"

I said, "What?"

She showed me Instagram. An account with my photo, @marcela_reader_queens, was announcing: "Signing my book 'Raising Readers Without Private School' tomorrow at 6 PM." I didn't have a book. It was Brian.

I went at 6 PM. There were 30 mothers waiting. With books printed with my face. I sat down. I signed. I didn't know what I was signing. A mother said, "Thank you, Marcela, for teaching us to be cultured without money." I signed, "With love." I left crying.

In July, Benicio asked me, "Mom, why are there 200 moms named like you on the internet?"

I said, "Because Mom sold her name."

He asked, "And me?"

I said, "You're original."

He said, "Original like the Benicio who goes to birthday parties to say hello?"

I didn't know what to say.

That week, Brian deposited the second month. $1,500. I didn't touch it. I left it in my digital wallet. I went to the Queens Library. I asked for Ficciones, for real. The librarian said, "Marcela, your card is blocked for excess loans." I showed her my ID. She said, "It shows as delinquent." I paid the $680 fine. She gave me the book.

I sat on the floor, between the shelves, like I did when I was : 20. I opened the book. I read "The Garden of Forking Paths". I didn't take a photo. I didn't post a story. I didn't log it on Goodreads. I just read it.

Benicio found me two hours later. "Mom, what are you doing?"

I said, "Reading."

He said, "Aren't you going to post it?"

I said, "No."

He asked, "Then what's the point?"

I said, "So it's mine."

I went back to the building. I opened my final Excel. I renamed it "Own_Culture.xlsx". I deleted everything. I left one single row.

Column A: Book

Column B: Ficciones

Column C: Read

Column D: Not for sale

At 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. It was Brian.

"Marcela, last month of the contract. Shall we renew? I'll bump you to $2,000."

I replied: "No. I want my theater photo back."

He responded: "Your photo isn't yours anymore. It belongs to 200 mothers who need to believe they are you."

I blocked him. I deleted Trust Wallet. I deleted Instagram. I put the library card back in my purse.

The next day, I went down to the hallway. They were all there. I told them, "Culture in installments is over."

Nora asked, "What do we post now?"

I said, "Nothing."

Sol asked, "How do we look cultured?"

I said, "By reading."

Ramón asked, "How much does that cost?"

I said, "Free, but it hurts."

Gustavo wrote in the ledger: "Neighbor Marcela reports recovering a book. Noted."

That night, Benicio asked me to read to him. I read Borges aloud. He fell asleep halfway through. I kept reading until 3:17 AM. My phone didn't vibrate. The only sound was the hum of Lucas's modem.

And I understood that the cultural crisis wasn't not being able to go to the theater.

It was having believed that culture was appearing cultured, and when we sold that, we were left with nothing that couldn't be photographed.

DENTAL CRISIS

I didn’t want to rent out my smile.

I swear by my Medicare card I’ve had since 1997, laminated, with the magnetic strip worn out. I didn’t want to.

Five years ago, I was fine. I had Medicare Advantage Plan G, full coverage. I went to the dentist in Manhattan, Dr. Miller, once a year. He’d do a cleaning, take an X-ray, and say, "Gladys, you have the teeth of a 30-year-old." I believed him. I had an Excel sheet, but it was for medical appointments, not debts.

Then my own health crisis hit, and I was downgraded to basic Medicare. Then came Lucas’s labor crisis, and I lent him my card for a physical. Then came Nora’s food crisis, and I lent her my front teeth for the meal photos ("it looks more trustworthy"). Then came Tony’s election crisis, and I lent my smile for his flyer. Then came Ray’s housing crisis, and I lent him my water glass to rinse after eating. Then came Marcie’s educational crisis, and I lent her my old dentures for Benicio’s theater class. Then came Sol’s clothing crisis, and I lent my smile for a clothing reel. Then came Luke’s communication crisis, and I lent my smiling photo for his LinkedIn profile. Then came Elsa’s judicial crisis, and I lent her my dentist for a certificate. Then came Marcie’s cultural crisis, and I lent my laugh for the book club.

I was the building’s smile.

It all started in February as a drill, not a pain. I took Advil 800mg. Nothing. I took Toradol. Nothing. I called Medicare.

"Gladys, your next available appointment is April 14th." It was February 18th. "Isn’t there anything sooner?" "No, ma’am, dental has a backlog."

I went to the ER at Queens General. They saw me. "Needs a root canal." I asked how much. "With basic Medicare, you pay 60% out of pocket." How much is that? "$2,800." I didn’t have it. "What if you just pull it?" "$450, but you lose the tooth."

I went back to the building with a swollen face. I ran into Nora. "Gladys, what happened to you?" I said, "My tooth." She said, "I know a guy at NYU, he’ll do it for free." I said, "No thanks, I have Medicare."

That night, I didn’t sleep. The pain shot up to my eye. I opened Excel. Like everyone else.

Column A: Pain.

Column B: Solution.

Column C: Price.

Column D: Do I have it?

Root Canal - Dr. Miller - $2, spitting blood. "Rinse with salt water." He didn't charge me.

I walked out with a bleeding mouth. I looked in the bathroom mirror at the dental school. I had a black hole upper right. I smiled. It didn't show much if I didn't open my mouth wide.

I went back to the building. I opened Excel. I added a row.

Column A: Tooth #3

Column B: Extracted

Column C: Price: $0

Column D: Pain: 10/10

That night, my phone vibrated. 3:17 AM.

"Gladys, this is Brian from Integral Dental Solutions. We saw your history. You have a smile with 87% efficiency. Are you interested in the 'Integral Smile' program?"

I replied with my mouth still swollen: "What do I have to do?"

He sent an audio message. "We give you a state-of-the-art implant, zero cost. You cede your before-and-after image rights for 5 years. We use it for advertising. You smile perfectly."

I said, "What about my tooth?"

He said, "Your tooth isn't yours anymore. It's ours."

I hesitated. I looked at the hole in the mirror. I thought about the $2,800 I didn't have. I thought about the wedding photos where I smiled through the pain.

I said, "When?"

He said, "Tomorrow, 8 AM, clinic in Westchester."

I went.

And I understood that I wasn't renting out my smile.

I was renting out the last part of my body that still hurt, and therefore I knew it was mine.

I said yes to Brian at 3:21 AM with the taste of blood still in my mouth. He didn't meet me at a clinic. He met me at a facility in Westchester that looked like a hotel.

I arrived at 8 AM. A girl with a tablet greeted me. "Gladys, did you bring your Medicare card?" I said, "Yes." She said, "We won't be using it." She made me sign 14 pages. "Image waiver, medical history waiver, smile waiver."

I signed with my left hand because my right was shaking.

They sat me down. They put me to sleep. When I woke up, I had something hard in my gum. An implant. They handed me a mirror. I smiled. I had all my teeth. White. Perfect. I looked 40.

"Gladys, it's perfect," the doctor said. "Now you're our model."

They discharged me. I paid nothing. They gave me a box with antibiotics, mouthwash, and a contract. "You cannot post smiling photos without tagging @IntegralSmile. For

Perfect. White. Everyone said, "Gladys looks great." No one noticed I didn't squint my eyes when I smiled.

That night, I looked in the bathroom mirror. I tried the old exercise I used to do when my tooth hurt: smile with pain. I couldn't. It didn't hurt. I tried biting into an apple. I couldn't. The implant doesn't bite, it just poses.

At 3:17 AM, my phone vibrated. It was Brian.

"Gladys, renewing contract. Bumping you to $1,000 a month. You just have to smile 20 times a week on social media."

I replied: "Brian, I want my hole back."

He replied: "The hole doesn't sell, Gladys. Perfection does."

I blocked him. I couldn't remove the implant, no. But I removed the phone. I deleted Instagram. I deleted the photos. I put the contract in the same box where I kept my old dentures.

The next day, I went down to the pharmacy. I bought Advil 800mg. Nothing

hurt, but I bought it anyway. Just in case.

I went up to my room. I sat in the kitchen. I opened my mouth to the microwave mirror. With my finger, I touched the implant. Cold. Smooth. Alien.

I forced a smile like before, with the hole. I couldn't. But I remembered the noise at NYU, the pull, the blood. And for a second, I felt pain.

And I understood that the dental crisis wasn't about not being able to afford the dentist.

It was trading the pain—which was mine—for a perfect smile that didn't belong to me, and realizing too late that I preferred the hole.

I closed the Excel. I saved it. Tomorrow I'm going to show it to Gustavo, so he can log it in the book.

Because if we're going to sell the country, at least let it be on record that we sold our teeth first.

NATIONAL CRISIS

I didn't want to lease the country.

I swear by the HOA Meeting Minutes Book No. 247 I've had since 2019, bound in black faux leather, with the pages numbered by hand. I didn't want to.

Ten years ago, I was fine. I was the property manager for three buildings in Queens. I collected management fees, had my office on Main Street, and had an Excel sheet, but it was for HOA dues, not crises.

Then came Lucas's labor crisis, and I forged a W-2 contract so he could look employed. Then came Nora's food crisis, and I authorized her to use the building's community room as a commercial kitchen. Then came Tony's election crisis, and I lent him the building's resident directory to gather petition signatures. Then came Ray's housing crisis, and I let him live in the super's room. Then came Gladys's health crisis, and I signed a proof of residence for her Medicare appeal. Then came Marcie's educational crisis, and I gave her an HOA fee discount in exchange for English tutoring for my daughter. Then came Sol's clothing crisis, and I let her use the laundry room as a showroom. Then came Luke's communication crisis, and I gave him the building's Wi-Fi password. Then came Elsa's judicial crisis, and I stored her blue folder in my office. Then came Marcie's cultural crisis, and I rented her the community room for her book club.

I was the building manager. I ended up being the crisis manager.

It all started in October 2025, when I did the annual budget review. I opened Excel. Like everyone else.

Column A: Crisis.

Column B: Resident.

Column C: Solution.

Column D: Status.

Labor – Lucas – leases hours – active

Food – Nora – leases meals – active

Electoral – Tony – leases votes – active

Housing – Ray – leases bed – active

Health – Gladys – leases insurance – active

Educational – Marcie – leases school – active

Clothing – Sol – leases clothes – active

Communication – Luke – leases identity – active

Judicial – Elsa – sold lawsuit – closed

Cultural – Marcie – leased culture – leased

Total: 10 crises, 0 internal solutions, 100% outsourced.

I printed it. I took it to the HOA board meeting. I read it out loud. No one was surprised. Ray said, "Well, Gustavo, that's just how the country is." Nora said, "At least we pay the HOA fees." Elsa said, "Put it in the minutes."

I did. Minutes No. 243: "It is noted that the building operates based on the leasing of others' lives."

In November, Brian called me. Not at 3:17 AM, but at 3:17 PM, office hours.

"Gustavo, this is Brian from Integral National Solutions. We saw your building's ledger. You have a 94% efficiency rate in tenant side-hustles. Are you interested in the 'Integral Nation' program?"

I asked what it was. He said, "We buy HOAs and co-ops. You stay as the building manager, but we become the owners. We pay you $5,000 a month. You cede legal administration to us. We pay off the building's debts, fix the elevator, paint the halls, install Ring cameras. The residents keep living here, but they pay us."

I asked if it was legal. He said, "It's as legal as leasing a vote."

I went to see Elsa. I showed her the contract. She said, "Gustavo, if you sign, you're no longer the manager. You're an employee."

I said, "Elsa, if I don't sign, Con Ed will shut off the power."

She said, "We're already paying for the power with Luke's life."

I signed. With my manager signature, the one I learned in the real estate course. Brian transferred $5,000 USD on the spot. With that, I paid Con Ed, the water bill, fixed the elevator that had been broken since 2022, painted the hallway, installed LED lights, and bought a security camera.

The residents celebrated. We had a barbecue on the roof. Tony toasted, "To

Gustavo, who saved the building." Nora made free meals. Sol lent clothes for the group photo. Luke gave free Wi-Fi. Marcie read a poem. Gladys brought medication for everyone. Ray slept in the newly renovated super's room. Elsa saved the minutes.

I was a hero.

Until December, when the final contract arrived. It wasn't for management. It was an acquisition.

"Integral National Solutions LLC acquires 100% of the usage, enjoyment, and administration rights of the property located at 655 27th Ave, Astoria, and of its inhabitants as permanent users."

I called Brian. "Inhabitants?"

He said, "Yes, you come with the building."

I said, "You can't sell people."

He said, "We don't sell them, we lease them. It's different."

I went to the County Clerk's office. The building was no longer listed under the HOA. It was listed under an LLC registered in Delaware.

I went back. I called an emergency HOA board meeting. Urgent. December 20th, 8:00 PM.

Everyone came. I read the contract. I showed them the Excel.

"Neighbors, I have to inform you that we are no longer owners. We are tenants of ourselves."

Silence.

Ray asked, "What about the HOA fees?" I said, "We pay them to Brian."

Nora asked, "What about the meals?" I said, "You sell them, but Brian takes 20%."

Tony asked, "What about the votes?" I said, "You already sold them, now Brian administers them."

Gladys asked, "What about my Medicare?" I said, "Brian gives you a corporate health plan."

Marcie asked, "What about Benicio's school?" I said, "Brian has an online school."

Sol asked, "What about my clothes?" I said, "Brian leases them to you."

Luke asked, "What about my Wi-Fi?" I said, "Brian is the Wi-Fi."

Elsa didn’t ask anything. She took notes.

"Gustavo, so what do we do now?" Ray asked.

I showed them the Meeting Minutes Book. Volume 247. I opened it to the last blank page.

"Now we do what we always do," I said. "We take notes."

I wrote: "Minutes No. “At 3:17 AM, the manager notes that the building is functioning perfectly. No debts. No shut-offs. No fights. Everyone pays. Everyone leases. Everyone survives. It is noted that we no longer know if this is a country or a contract. The book is closed."

I signed. Gustavo.

I turned off the light. I looked out the window. Queens was sleeping. In all the buildings, Brian’s LED lights were on.

And I understood that the national crisis wasn’t a crisis.

It was a silent eviction. We didn’t leave the country. The country left us, and let us keep living inside, paying rent.

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

EXTRAORDINARY HOA MEETING

Act No. 247 – 655 27th Ave, Astoria, Queens

At 8:37 PM on a Thursday. 37 minutes late because the elevator was broken, and everyone walked up the stairs cursing. They gather on the 1st-floor landing.

Present: Gustavo (HOA Manager), Ray, Nora, Gladys, Marcie, Sol, Luke, Tony, Elsa.

Absent with notice: The 7th-floor tenants (moved to Madrid).

GUSTAVO: (bangs a pot) "Order, neighbors. Order. Agenda: Point one, reading of previous minutes. Point two, HOA fees. Point three, existential crisis."

RAY: "What's this existential thing? Does it come with a fee hike?"

GUSTAVO: "No, Ray. It's worse. We don't know why we pay HOA fees anymore."

NORA: "I pay so my kitchen doesn't leak."

GLADYS: "I pay so the ambulance knows where I live."

MARCIE: "I pay to have an address that isn't 'behind the Astoria Park benches'."

SOL: "I pay for Wi-Fi. Oh wait, the Wi-Fi is Luke's."

LUKE: "The Wi-Fi isn't mine anymore. It's Brian's."

TONY: "Is Brian on the HOA board?"

ELSA: (taking notes) "Brian is listed as 'Integral Provider'."

GUSTAVO: "Fine. I'll read the previous minutes. 'Approved: Ray lives in the super's room in exchange for ironing shirts.' Any objections?"

RAY: "I object. I don't iron anymore. I rent out the iron."

NORA: "I object. The super's room smells like fabric softener."

GUSTAVO: "Approved by majority. Point two: HOA fees. We owe three months of hallway electricity to Con Ed."

MARCIE: "Why don't we just cut it? We live by phone light anyway."

GLADYS: "My phone is Luke's."

LUKE: "My phone is Brian's."

SOL: "Brian belongs to everyone."

TONY: "I propose we pay the Con Ed bill with votes. I have 300 unused votes from the last election."

GUSTAVO: "Votes don't pay Con Ed, Tony."

TONY: "What if we sell them?"

ELSA: (writes) "Proposal: barter democracy for electricity."

RAY: "I propose we pay nothing and declare ourselves an existential cooperative."

NORA: "What's an existential cooperative?"

RAY: "Like a regular co-op, but instead of producing, we just doubt."

GUSTAVO: "Point three. Existential crisis. Who wants to start?"

(Silence. Luke's modem blinks in the corner).

GLADYS: "I'll start. Yesterday I went to the doctor. He asked, 'How do you feel?' I said, 'I don't know, how do I look?' He said, 'I see you have Medicare Advantage Plan C.' I said, 'Then I feel like Plan C'."

MARCIE: "The public school counselor asked me, 'What is your purpose?' I said, 'For my kid not to fail the grade.' She said, 'That's a goal, not a purpose.' I said, 'Well, then my purpose is to have goals'."

SOL: "Yesterday I tried on clothes and didn't know who I was. I put on a dress and I was Nora. I put on a blazer and I was Marcie. I put on a coat and I was Gladys. I looked at myself naked and I was Luke without Wi-Fi."

LUKE: "Yesterday I tried to Google 'who am I' and Google asked, 'Did you mean: who am I to pay?'"

TONY: "Yesterday I dreamed I was voting, and the vote voted for me."

NORA: "Yesterday I cooked noodles and the noodles asked me, 'Why do you eat us if you'll just be hungry again tomorrow?'"

RAY: "Yesterday I slept in the super's room and the room said, 'Ray, you don't live here, you just survive here'."

ELSA: (writes) "All present report hallucinations with inanimate objects."

GUSTAVO: "Neighbors, this is serious. I propose we call a professional."

MARCIE: "A therapist?"

GUSTAVO: "No, an ontological coach. They charge in USD."

SOL: "What if we pay with clothes?"

LUKE: "What if we pay with data?"

NORA: "What if we pay with meals?"

TONY: "What if we pay with votes?"

GLADYS: "What if we pay with health?"

RAY: "What if we don't pay and just play existentially dead?"

(At that moment, the intercom buzzes. It's Brian).

BRIAN: (enters with a portable projector) "Good evening, neighbors. I'm here to present 'Integral Meaning'."

GUSTAVO: "Are you invited?"

BRIAN: "I'm in all the building's WhatsApp groups. That's invitation enough."

ELSA: (writes) "Uninvited vendor enters."

BRIAN: (projects a PowerPoint) "Slide 1: Why do you wake up? Slide 2: You don't. Slide 3: I will rent it to you."

NORA: "How do you rent meaning?"

BRIAN: "Easy. Basic Plan: $30/month. Includes one motivational quote per day and a generic purpose: 'be a better person'. Premium Plan: $50. Includes personalized purpose, a goals Excel sheet, and an excuse to skip family gatherings."

MARCIE: "What about the Platinum Plan?"

BRIAN: "$80/month. Includes all of the above, plus the feeling that your life has a script."

SOL: "What if I don't have dollars?"

BRIAN: "We accept crisp $20s, used clothes, Wi-Fi hours, votes, meals, and health."

LUKE: "Do you accept identities?"

BRIAN: "Especially identities."

RAY: "I want the Basic Plan but without having to get up."

BRIAN: "We have the Horizontal Plan. We audio-message you the purpose while you sleep."

GLADYS: "I want a purpose that covers my Medicare."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Plan C'. You feel covered, even when you're not."

TONY: "I want a purpose that makes me win an election."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Democracy'. You lose, but you feel like you participated."

NORA: "I want a purpose that fills my fridge."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Meal'. We send you a photo of food every day."

ELSA: (writes) "Sale of meaning via delivery offered."

GUSTAVO: "Neighbors, shall we vote?"

MARCIE: "I vote for the Premium Plan, but the HOA pays for it."

SOL: "I vote for the Basic Plan, but in installments."

LUKE: "I vote not to vote. That’s my purpose."

RAY: "I abstain. It’s the only thing I get for free."

GLADYS: "I vote with my hand raised because otherwise my back hurts."

TONY: "I vote twice, just in8:37 PM on a Thursday. 37 minutes late because the elevator was broken, and everyone walked up the stairs cursing. They gather on the 1st-floor landing.

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GLADYS: "I pay so the ambulance knows where I live."

MARCIE: "I pay to have an address that isn’t 'behind the Astoria Park benches'."

SOL: "I pay for Wi-Fi. Oh wait, the Wi-Fi is Luke’s."

LUKE: "The Wi-Fi isn’t mine anymore. It’s Brian’s."

TONY: "Is Brian on the HOA board?"

ELSA: (taking notes) "Brian is listed as 'Integral Provider'."

GUSTAVO: "Fine. I’ll read the previous minutes. 'Approved: Ray lives in the super’s room in exchange for ironing shirts.' Any objections?"

RAY: "I object. I don’t iron anymore. I rent out the iron."

NORA: "I object. The super's room smells like fabric softener."

GUSTAVO: "Approved by majority. Point two: HOA fees. We owe three months of hallway electricity to Con Ed."

MARCIE: "Why don't we just cut it? We live by phone light anyway."

GLADYS: "My phone is Luke's."

LUKE: "My phone is Brian's."

SOL: "Brian belongs to everyone."

TONY: "I propose we pay the Con Ed bill with votes. I have 300 unused votes from the last election."

GUSTAVO: "Votes don't pay Con Ed, Tony."

TONY: "What if we sell them?"

ELSA: (writes) "Proposal: barter democracy for electricity."

RAY: "I propose we pay nothing and declare ourselves an existential cooperative."

NORA: "What's an existential cooperative?"

RAY: "Like a regular co-op, but instead of producing, we just doubt."

GUSTAVO: "Point three. Existential crisis. Who wants to start?"

(Silence. Luke's modem blinks in the corner).

GLADYS: "I'll start. Yesterday I went to the doctor. He asked, 'How do you feel?' I said, 'I don't know, how do I look?' He said, 'I see you have Medicare Advantage Plan C.' I said, 'Then I feel like Plan C'."

MARCIE: "The public school counselor asked me, 'What is your purpose?' I said, 'For my kid not to fail the grade.' She said, 'That's a goal, not a purpose.' I said, 'Well, then my purpose is to have goals'."

SOL: "Yesterday I tried on clothes and didn't know who I was. I put on a dress and I was Nora. I put on a blazer and I was Marcie. I put on a coat and I was Gladys. I looked at myself naked and I was Luke without Wi-Fi."

LUKE: "Yesterday I tried to Google 'who am I' and Google asked, 'Did you mean: who am I to pay?'"

TONY: "Yesterday I dreamed I was voting, and the vote voted for me."

NORA: "Yesterday I cooked noodles and the noodles asked me, 'Why do you eat us if you'll just be hungry again tomorrow?'"

RAY: "Yesterday I slept in the super's room and the room said, 'Ray, you don't live here, you just survive here'."

ELSA: (writes) "All present report hallucinations with inanimate objects."

GUSTAVO: "Neighbors, this is serious. I propose we call a professional."

MARCIE: "A therapist?"

GUSTAVO: "No, an ontological coach. They charge in USD."

SOL: "What if we pay with clothes?"

LUKE: "What if we pay with data?"

NORA: "What if we pay with meals?"

TONY: "What if we pay with votes?"

GLADYS: "What if we pay with health?"

RAY: "What if we don't pay and just play existentially dead?"

(At that moment, the intercom buzzes. It's Brian).

BRIAN: (enters with a portable projector) "Good evening, neighbors. I'm here to present 'Integral Meaning'."

GUSTAVO: "Are you invited?"

BRIAN: "I'm in all the building's WhatsApp groups. That's invitation enough."

ELSA: (writes) "Uninvited vendor enters."

BRIAN: (projects a PowerPoint) "Slide 1: Why do you wake up? Slide 2: You don't. Slide 3: I will rent it to you."

NORA: "How do you rent meaning?"

BRIAN: "Easy. Basic Plan: $30/month. Includes one motivational quote per day and a generic purpose: 'be a better person'. Premium Plan: $50. Includes personalized purpose, a goals Excel sheet, and an excuse to skip family gatherings."

MARCIE: "What about the Platinum Plan?"

BRIAN: "$80/month. Includes all of the above, plus the feeling that your life has a script."

SOL: "What if I don't have dollars?"

BRIAN: "We accept crisp $20s, used clothes, Wi-Fi hours, votes, meals, and health."

LUKE: "Do you accept identities?"

BRIAN: "Especially identities."

RAY: "I want the Basic Plan but without having to get up."

BRIAN: "We have the Horizontal Plan. We audio-message you the purpose while you sleep."

GLADYS: "I want a purpose that covers my Medicare."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Plan C'. You feel covered, even when you're not."

TONY: "I want a purpose that makes me win an election."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Democracy'. You lose, but you feel like you participated."

NORA: "I want a purpose that fills my fridge."

BRIAN: "We have 'Purpose Meal'. We send you a photo of food every day."

ELSA: (writes) "Sale of meaning via delivery offered."

GUSTAVO: "Neighbors, shall we vote?"

MARCIE: "I vote for the Premium Plan, but the HOA pays for it."

SOL: "I vote for the Basic Plan, but in installments."

LUKE: "I vote not to vote. That's my purpose."

RAY: "I abstain. It's the only thing I get for free."

GLADYS: "I vote with my hand raised because otherwise my back hurts."

TONY: "I vote twice, just in case."

NORA: "I vote with a meal."

ELSA: (counts) "7 in favor, 0 against, 1 abstention, 1 edible vote."

GUSTAVO: "Approved. Integral Meaning is contracted."

BRIAN: "Perfect. Your first purpose arrives tomorrow at 3:17 AM via email."

ALL: "Why at 3:17?"

BRIAN: "Because that's the hour you ask yourselves why you're alive."

(The hallway light cuts out. They are left in the dark, illuminated only by their phones).

RAY: "What do we do now?"

SOL: "We exist."

LUKE: "With or without Wi-Fi?"

NORA: "With hunger."

MARCIE: "With debt."

GLADYS: "With Plan C."

TONY: "With votes."

ELSA: (writes in the dark) "At 9:03 PM, the assembly is suspended due to lack of light and meaning. To be continued tomorrow, if we find a reason."

GUSTAVO: "Neighbors, before you leave, does anyone know why we

came?"

(Silence. The broken elevator is heard).

ALL: "No."

End.

Or not. Because in America, when you have nothing left, someone always shows up to rent you what remains.

And you, just in case, say yes.

POSTFACE

Or: How Parody Became Description Without Asking Permission

There is a particular discomfort in rereading something you wrote three years ago and discovering that what then seemed like a comic exaggeration is today, simply, a chronicle.

This book was written in 2023 as a parody. Not as a denunciation, not as a manifesto, not as a solemn warning. As a parody: that minor, discredited genre that consists of taking a logic to its absurd conclusion so the absurdity speaks for itself.

Tom selling organs on BioDash was, in 2023, a hyperbole. Brian offering "human biomaterial integration" was a joke about the gig economy taken to the extreme. The fridge with half a lemon and a yogurt expired in 2021 was a punchline, not an inventory.

In 2026, reread, the text produces a different discomfort. Not the discomfort of dark humor, but the discomfort of recognizing a map.

I don't pretend to have had a vision. I didn't. What happened is simpler and more unsettling: the logic the text describes wasn't an extrapolation. It was an observation of trends already in motion in 2023 that simply accelerated. The author didn't prophesy anything. The context caught up to the text.

That raises a question I don't know how to answer: what happens to what I write today?

There is an idea that crosses disciplines and that no one listens to closely enough because it's too simple to seem sophisticated: you cannot sustain infinite growth on a finite substrate.

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen formalized this in the 70s by applying the principles of thermodynamics to economics. Entropy, he argued, is not a metaphor: it is a law. Resources degrade. Useful energy dissipates. A system that consumes more than it can regenerate does not grow indefinitely; it collapses. No one paid much attention because it was uncomfortable, and because growth, at that moment, still seemed possible.

The same logic, decades later, appeared in computing.

For fifty years, Moore's Law functioned as a promise and a liturgy: the density of transistors on an integrated circuit would double approximately

every two years. And for fifty years, it worked. Until it stopped working, not for lack of ambition or investment, but because it hit a physical limit. You cannot manufacture one-nanometer transistors with the same logic used for ten-micrometer ones. Physics doesn't negotiate. Atoms are the size they are.

Today, something analogous is happening with language models. Doubling the number of parameters doesn't double intelligence. Doubling compute power doesn't double reasoning capacity. Improvements become marginal, costs become exponential, and the horizon of Artificial General Intelligence recedes every time we reach it.

It's not pessimism; it's physics applied to information: here too there is an invisible wall, here too the substrate is finite.

The question I ask myself, and that this postface attempts to articulate without answering, is whether the same logic doesn't apply to societies.

National Crisis describes, in a dark comedy tone, an economy that has decided to treat people as resources. Not as citizens, not as community, not as ends in themselves: as assets. Assets that can be rented, fractionated, optimized, and when they no longer yield, discarded.

The logic is impeccable as long as the substrate holds.

The problem is that the substrate is not infinite.

A society is not an inexhaustible reserve of labor, consumption, resilience, or community fabric. It has absorption limits. There is a point where precarity no longer produces more flexible workers, but broken ones. There is a point where the commodification of bonds produces not more efficiency, but more loneliness, and loneliness has costs that don't appear on any spreadsheet until it's too late. There is a point where the system extracts more than it can regenerate.

At that moment, the logic that seemed impeccable reveals itself for what it always was: a bet against thermodynamics.

The characters in this book reach, each in their own way, that point. Tom, without a heart, discovers that the only way to have nothing left to give is to have nothing left. Ray, sleeping on the stairwell landing, is free not because he escaped the system, but because he no longer exists as a rentable unit. The assembly in the final chapter doesn't know why it gathered, but stays anyway, because staying together without a productive purpose is the only act the system cannot monetize.

It’s not redemption. It’s the exhaustion of the stock.

In 2022 or 2023, some authors boasted about publishing texts entirely generated by artificial intelligence. It was a provocation, an experiment, a gesture of avant-garde. Today, a sort of guilty concealment operates: no one admits too easily how much of what they publish was assisted by a model. The wheel turned. The great white hope became, for many, the great black threat.

I arrived against the grain, as almost always. In 2023, when everyone was celebrating, I was skeptical. In 2026, when many fear, I found something I didn’t expect: that working with language models didn’t take away my voice, but helped me organize what I already had.

This book, which in 2023 was a mosaic of loose ideas, exists in its current form because a language model helped me see the order that was already there.

That doesn’t resolve the ethical questions. It complicates them.

Because the very developments that allowed me to organize this book are the ones fueling the extractive mechanisms the book describes. The same logic that produces Brian produces the platforms that trained the models I work with. There is no clean exit from that contradiction. There is only the possibility of naming it.

I wonder what this postface will look like in 2029.

I wonder if what today sounds like a reasonable reflection on limits and social entropy will sound, in three years, like another involuntary description of something that was already happening while I was writing it.

I don’t know. No one knows. The only advantage the writer has over the predictor is that the writer doesn’t need to be right: they need to be precise about what they see at the moment they see it.

This book was precise about what it saw in 2023.

If in 2029 someone rereads it and discovers that this postface was also a map, it won’t be my merit.

It will be, once again, the demerit of the context.

ADAPTER'S NOTE

This text was born in Córdoba, Argentina. However, what you hold in your hands is not a translation, but a *situated transposition*.

The logic of collapse described here—the commodification of the body, debt as a mode of life, and algorithmic extraction—is not a local phenomenon. It is universal. To ensure the reader feels the visceral impact of this reality without the friction of foreign cultural references or explanatory footnotes, the substrate of the book has been deliberately relocated to Astoria, Queens, New York.

The soul of the work remains Argentine: its defeatist humor, its rhythm, and its unflinching gaze upon the absurd. But its skin is American. The operators of trauma (*Rappi Health*, the IMF, the *monotributo*) have been transposed to their real-world equivalents in the US gig economy and medical debt ecosystem (*BioDash*, *Apex Health Capital*, *1099 Independent Contractor*).

This book does not seek to explain Argentina to the United States. It seeks to demonstrate that the mirror of collapse is already installed on both sides of the glass.